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CECIL'S TRYST.

CECIL'S TRYST.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'LOST SIR MASSINGBERD,' 'A PERFECT TREASURE,'
'LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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CECIL'S TRYST.

CHAPTER I.

BAD NEWS.

In spite of my forebodings, Nelly arrived safe and sound in Merton-square, and filled our house with sunshine. There is, however, no need to paint my raptures, since the intention of this history is to describe not my own life, but only so much of it as is (directly or indirectly) connected with my cousin Cecil. Let it suffice to say that we were supremely blessed in one another's company, and that the contemplation of our

happiness used to affect Aunt Ben so sympathetically, that she would often burst into tears. We were rather gay than otherwise, for London was as new to Nelly as it had been to me, and its most ordinary amusements afforded her great pleasure. We went pretty often to the theatres, and it quite vexed me to see how she enjoyed the performances, with their hansom cabs, their real Firemen, and the *bonâ fide* Well into which the villain of the piece fell backwards with an audible splash. Of course we went to see Miss Brabant act, and all acknowledged that she looked splendidly; but my two companions were rather cold in their encomiums of her talent. I am sure that my aunt did her best to prejudice Nelly against Ruth, and I think in part succeeded. There were no questions asked about my visits to Laburnum Villa, so obviously necessary in connection with my drama of the *Foot-page*, which Miss Brabant had promised to have brought out; and any details of such inter-

views with which I favoured them were received with but a languid interest. I know it would have given Ruth an intense pleasure—and something more—if Nelly had gone to see her; but when I asked her to do so, she had replied: 'Yes, dear Fred, if you wish it very much;' and, though I was not yet a married man, I knew what *that* meant.

Ruth never reproached her with this conduct—the offspring not of Pride, of course, but of Aunt Ben's Prudence—nor ceased to speak of her with the utmost gratitude and respect; but it wounded her deeply, and I fear in the end did her grievous harm. It made her feel more than ever that she was cut off from the wholesome side of life, and tended to attach her to that undesirable society among which she had hitherto moved without absolutely belonging to it. My remonstrances with Aunt Ben upon this point were fruitless. She 'had nothing to say against Ruth's cha-

racter (she was sure), but the young woman had chosen a path for herself of which she, for her part, could in no way approve.' As to the argument, that she should do her best for her, for Cecil's sake, 'it was for his very sake that she wished to have no relations with her; when he came home, it was to be hoped that he would be in his right mind, and any intimacy on our part was to be deprecated which was likely to bring his old delusion to his recollection.'

Aunt Ben was one of those admirable women who have no parallel in the opposite sex for kindliness, self-sacrifice, and good sense—and whose determination not to listen to reason, where their prejudices are concerned, is impregnable.

It was within less than three weeks of Nelly's arrival, that as we three were walking over Southwark-bridge one afternoon, we had to stand aside close to the balustrades while six men went by us, each bearing an immense letter on a placard,

and with *To-night* in characters of blood upon their chests, instead of a waistcoat.

'What *does* that mean?' asked Nelly.

'It's some advertisement of a music-hall or a play,' said I carelessly. 'If you read the letters — supposing the men were in their proper order, which does not always happen — you would get the name of the performance.'

'But I did read them, Fred, and that's what gave me such a surprise. It was the word *Pedlar*, and that—'

In an instant, like one, most literally, 'in hot pursuit of Fame,' I was running after the men with placards. My worst suspicions were realised. On the reverse side of these sandwiches, in a sort of mediæval type, on a scroll, appeared the words, Y^e^ Hole in y^e^ Wall. A grotesque figure was painted beneath it, a caricature of the manager, or perhaps of myself. Its colours were yellow, and green, and red.

'You are disappointed, dear, I am

afraid,' said Nelly's gentle voice, as I stood gazing over the bridge at the dark river, while Hood's poem recurred to my mind with a new meaning:

'One more unfortunate,
Rashly importunate.

* * *

Just on the brink of it,
Picture it, think of it.'

My play was coming out that very night, without a word of warning, at that horrible Hole!

I gasped out something, in reply to her kind inquiries, to that effect.

'But the word "Pack" was not on the placards,' reasoned Nelly.

'I wish "Pedlar" had not been there either,' was my sombre reply. 'O that villain Burder!'

'They haven't put "of Gatcombe" on the placards, have they, Fred?' pleaded Aunt Ben. 'Not Wray of Gatcombe?'

'I daresay it's on the bills,' groaned I

despairingly. 'I must go and see.' I hailed a four-wheel cab, and dispatched the ladies home in it, then jumped into a hansom myself. 'Do you know the Hole-in-the-Wall?' asked I through the hole in the roof.

'Bingles's Free and Easy, *we* calls it,' was the crushing reply. 'O yes; I'll take you there in no time.'

And he did. He pulled up at a gigantic public-house—for a dram, as I fondly hoped. 'This is Bingles's,' he said. And it was.

I asked at the bar for the proprietor, and was informed that 'Mr. Bingles was in the theátyr.' A pot-boy undertook to conduct me to him. We passed through a large boarded court with a stand for musicians in it placed in a garden composed of six American aloes in tubs.

'Here's where they dance,' said the pot-boy, perceiving that I was a stranger to his lord's domain. 'Five hundred couples and more there'll be on a fine night here.'

'And how many does your theatre hold?'

'Our theátyr?' said he, as if in delicate reproof of my mispronunciation. 'O, that holds as many as it can git.'

'There is a new play to be acted to-night, is there not?'

'I daresay, sir; there mostly is, once a week.'

'Do your plays only run six days, then?' asked I aghast.

'Why, no, sir. If our master was to try to run 'em seven, the Bobbies would be down upon him pretty sharp. You can square 'em a'most for everything, except Sunday-work.'

It was not worth while to undeceive this young man, though my inquiry certainly had no connection with the Sabbath question.

We had arrived at the theatre by this time, a huge oblong edifice, before the stage-door of which a stout squat man was standing in his shirt-sleeves, smoking a pipe.

'That is Bingles,' muttered the pot-boy, and vanished.

For the first time I beheld a manager in the flesh.

'Morning!' said the great man, taking his right thumb out of the arm-hole of his waistcoat to remove his pipe. 'What can I do for *you*, sir?'

'I have called upon business in connection with the new play that you are bringing out to-night.'

'Ay, ay; yes, I believe there is one.'

'Believe?' said I. 'Why, it's advertised all over the town.'

Mr. Bingles nodded, and removed his pipe once more, to scratch his head with the stem of it.

'I am the author of that play,' said I, with some dignity.

A fly had settled upon the manager's nose, induced by what temptation it is impossible to imagine (if it had been a butterfly, I should not have been surprised, since

it might have mistaken that favourable description of eruption known to the vulgar, if not to the scientific, as 'grog-blossoms,' for flowers); and Mr. Bingles proceeded to catch it with elaboration, and succeeded.

'Very good,' said he. 'You want to have your name in the bills? I thought you would, but Burder said you wouldn't. It's not my fault.'

'I want nothing of the kind, Mr. Bingles. But I do desire an explanation of your extraordinary conduct in never letting me know that the play was about to be produced. I have not even been invited to a rehearsal.'

'What's the use?' replied the manager curtly. 'It only leads to disagreements. Gillow—that's our funny man, you know—will always have his own way; and as for our other people, why, they don't matter.'

'Do you mean that it does not matter how the pathetic and sentimental characters

of the *Pedlar's Pack* are sustained?' inquired I in amazement.

'Just so; it don't signify tuppence. If Gillow can tickle the public, the play goes; if it don't go, it stops. Our last play stopped quite sudden, and that's how yourn was put on in such a hurry. Not one of my company,' said Mr. Bingles, in triumph, 'knew a line of it yesterday morning!'

'And they're going to act it to-night?'

'Most cert'ny. See bills.'

I had given Mr. Burder full authority to dispose of my drama, and I had no reason to believe that I could restrain Mr. Bingles from doing what he pleased in the matter; nothing remained for me, therefore, but conciliation. 'I suppose they will take pains to improve themselves in accuracy, and in their conception of the author's meaning, as they go on?' observed I.

'O yes; never fear about that. Gillow is never the same man two evenings running.'

I had already dreadful presentiments about Gillow. 'And how many evenings, Mr. Bingles, do you think the *Pedlar's Pack* will run?'

'It is quite impossible to say, sir. It all depends on how Gillow takes. I call him Vaccination on that account; sometimes he spots them, and sometimes he don't. Our last play ran—walked, I should say—like a blessed ghost in an empty house, for three nights. The one we had before was a—'

'Was a *what?*' inquired I, in alarm. I did not quite catch the word; but I have a very strong suspicion that Mr. Bingles used the term 'buster.'

'Was a great success,' continued he; 'it ran ten nights.'

'And how much,' said I, emboldened by Mr. Bingles's manner to be frank myself, 'did the author make by that transaction?'

'Why, lucky dog!' cried the manager, slapping his knee, 'I offered him thirty

shillings down; but he said: "No; I'll chance it—I'll be paid by the night;" and so he was. Five shillings a night, sir, for ten nights, did I pay that fellow; and the copyright of the play remains his own, to do what he likes with.'

This was the one piece of good news that Mr. Bingles gave me. The copyright of the *Pedlar's Pack* would remain my own after it had once passed through this terrible ordeal. Along with the other thirty or forty plays—all supplied by answers to advertisements—that came out at the Hole-in-the-Wall per annum, it would probably flourish for a week, then fade, and be forgotten, to reappear, I hoped, in a nobler sphere. As to remuneration, Burder had arranged nothing about that; and there was nothing to be done but to accept the same terms as my predecessor.

My manager and I parted on excellent terms. He had given me a private box for that evening, and his last words were

a courteous invitation to partake of refreshment.

''Ave a drain, sir?—No? Well, perhaps to-night, then, you'll come in time to drink a glass with Gillow. You'll find him fust-rate company.'

Aunt Ben, Nelly, and myself were in time for the play that night, but not to drink a glass with Gillow. Our leisure was wholly taken up in the contemplation of the interior of the Theatre Royal Hole-in-the-Wall—its decorations, arrangements, and peculiarities. The box which had been reserved for our use had three cane chairs in it; but the accommodation in that respect was insufficient; because, as in the case of Silverhair and the Three Bears, somebody had been sitting on the third chair and had sat the bottom out. Round the outside of each box ran a dark fringe of about six inches long, which we at first took for painting in panel: this, however, was caused by a habit in which

the inmates indulged of hanging their ungloved hands over the ledges, and beating time or applause therewith upon the woodwork beneath. In the centre of the building, which was very large, was a refreshment bar (with entrances from the pit), in which was a beer-engine of great power, worked, as it seemed, upon the perpetual motion principle. Delicacies of all kinds — the audience were informed by placard — could be procured within the establishment and without leaving their seats, 'as good as at any house in the neighbourhood.' This was a bold statement, since, to judge from the drop-curtain, which, in place of a classical picture, exhibited a congeries of local advertisements, the neighbourhood was in a condition to supply every desire of humanity from the cradle to the grave—from *Infants' Elixir* to a *One-horse Hearse.* The stalls —for there *were* stalls—had no divisions between them, and were patronised (my

aunt charitably supposed) either by married folk, or by young persons whose engagements were sufficiently acknowledged in society to admit of their being tender towards one another. The protecting arm of the swain (in its shirt-sleeve) was thrown, almost in every case, around his beloved object, who, on her part, leaned her confiding head upon his manly bosom. The question of toilet had greatly puzzled my two companions; they did not like to be too finely dressed—and yet they had an idea that the tenants of a private box ought to do credit to the establishment: the result had been what they considered to be a medium apparel, but which, by its contrast with that of the other female occupants of the house, was a blaze of splendour. Much public comment was therefore passed upon them, which, though for the most part of a complimentary character, they felt to be embarrassing, and were much relieved when the curtain

rose, and the general attention was directed to the stage.

It is not my purpose to describe the performance of that unhappy piece; a shiver goes through my frame, as I recall it now, similar to that evoked by the opening of a pill-box. It was not my play at all, but a heterogeneous compound, half of which owed its paternity to me, and half to Gillow. He did not act the comic character, because, I suppose, it was not sufficiently important for him; he took a serious rôle, and made *that* comic. He was the legal guardian of the heroine, a bluff good-humoured gentleman enough (as I had made him), but not likely, when visiting his ward at school, to put on her backboard, and sing a comic song with a dumb-bell in each hand. He made a joke about a 'dumb belle,' which, instead of falling flat, as it ought to have done—it fell on *me* just like a cold pat of lead—was up-

roariously applauded. My aunt began to applaud too, which compelled me to tell her that I was not answerable for the witticism. Next to 'gag' (an interpolation of original dialogue), Mr. Gillow was remarkable for original costume. He had a green coat with brass buttons and nankeen pantaloons; and they must have been of very durable materials, since, in the second act, though 'twenty years were supposed to have elapsed' in the action of the drama, he wore them still. As to the pathetic touches, they moved me to tears of chagrin; for the actresses had but one solitary *h* among them, which they invariably prefixed to the word 'honour.' A cry for assistance in extremity, followed by the reflection that, under the circumstances, it was no use to cry, was thus rendered by the heroine: ''Elp, 'elp! but 'ow?' Then, with a disappointed air, she added: 'Alas, I 'ave no 'ope, except in 'eaven.'

Altogether, the *Pedlar's Pack*, as performed at the Hole-in-the-Wall, was too dreadful to sit out; the Inquisition itself could hardly have devised for a dramatic author a torture more terrible than to see his first-born play so torn in pieces before his eyes.

When we had left the place, however, and were in the cab, and just as Aunt Ben was in the act of saying something of consolation and condolement, the full absurdity of the whole affair began to strike us, and we all three indulged in quite a paroxysm of laughter. We had each a favourite quotation to repeat from Mr. Gillow, or an aspiration (without an aspirate) from the other performers, and made very merry with our *fiasco* all the way home.

I know not whether it really is so, but it seems to me that it is the times when the laughter is loudest, and the heart most free from care, which envious Fate selects

to shoot at us poor mortals her sharpest arrows.

I noticed that as soon as we entered the house my aunt's mirth had died away; she ate nothing at supper, though we had a lobster, which was her favourite dish, and immediately afterwards proposed retiring upstairs, on the plea of fatigue.

I was sitting in my own room, with a pipe, as my custom was when the ladies had withdrawn, when the door opened, and in came Aunt Ben with a ghastly face.

'I found this on the hall table when we came home,' said she, holding up a letter with a deep black edge. 'I snatched it up, and put it in my pocket, so that Nelly should not see it. It is from Switzerland, and I am afraid there is bad news.'

'Good heavens!' cried I; 'from Cecil?'

'Open it; it is for you,' said my aunt, with a certain twitching at the corners of her mouth, which only manifested itself with her at times of great emotion.

I tore open the envelope at once.

'It *is* bad news,' said I solemnly. 'Poor Jane is dead!'

'Lord have mercy on us!' ejaculated my aunt. 'I knew there was death in it. I am sorry, Heaven knows, from the bottom of my heart; and yet I am almost ashamed to say it: I feel thankful that it is no worse.'

'No *worse?*' returned I, greatly displeased; for though my conscience was clear enough as respected poor Jane, I felt at the moment a sort of remorse that I had been unable to reciprocate her affection. 'How could it have been worse, aunt?'

'My dear,' said she, 'I was afraid that it was Cecil.'

CHAPTER II.

THE RETURN HOME.

JANE was not only dead, but, what is much more shocking to those who receive such calamitous news, she had died a violent death. Cecil's letter ran as follows:

Æggischorn Hotel.

MY DEAREST FRIEND, — I write this in the most terrible distress of mind and wretchedness that it is possible to conceive. My dearest Jane is dead and lost. I told you (I think) in my last letter how bold and venturesome she was in our mountain excursions, exciting the wonder of our fellow-tourists, and even of the guides. Well, that is all over now. She has paid the penalty of her rashness—if she indeed

were rash—with her precious life: precious to me, at all events, my friend, if to no other. Even now, when I wish to write of her, so united were we, that I find myself writing, not of her fate, but of my own, which is to be alone in the world for ever.

We had been staying at this hotel for some time, and making excursions from it among the mountains; especially we had been more than once to the beautiful Märjelensee, and had grown quite familiar with it. Beyond it lies the Alitsch glacier; we had been thither also. The snow had hidden its crevasses, so that we had to be very careful; but our guide was a good one, and perhaps for that very reason his work looked much easier than it really was. He told us that the snow was the great danger; and that, if we could only have seen our way, there would have been little to fear. A few days afterwards, I proposed to Jane — yes, it was I; I own

it—to go to the Märjelensee alone. I had not the least intention to proceed farther; and, as it happened, we did not even go thither alone, for we were accompanied by a party bound for the Faulberg, where they were to pass the night on the rocks. These, with their guides, left us upon the brink of the Alitsch glacier, with the understanding that we ourselves were returning homeward—that is, to the hotel. How shall I describe to you what then happened? I grow sick and faint even while I think of it. Jane and I watched our late companions until they were specks—black dots on the waste of ice and snow. It was early in the afternoon, and we had plenty of time before us. Alas, for one of us there was an eternity! It was Jane, and not I, who then proposed that we should extend our own wanderings a little. A great peak rose above us, one side of which went sheer down to the glacier; but the other, though steep, looked prac-

ticable enough from where we stood. 'Let us climb it,' said she; 'what a splendid view we shall then have!' You know, dearest Fred, that I could never refuse my sister anything; and, besides, I confess that I saw no great danger in the adventure. Well, we climbed it, and rested on its wedge-like summit, beneath which we could look — though scarce without some dizziness — right down upon the glacier, bare of snow just there, and showing in places a crack—a crevice, as it appeared; each of which, however, was a deep crevasse. There was scarce a breath of air abroad, as we stood leaning on our alpenstocks, entranced with the solemn splendours of the scene. I had just looked at my watch—it was half-past three o'clock—and had mechanically turned round in the direction of the Æggischorn, when a terrible cry rang through the silent air. Jane was no longer by my side! O heaven, the horror of that moment! My heart ceased

to beat; it seemed as though my own life had fled with hers; for even in that moment, as I strive to believe, she had lost her life. I strive, but I cannot persuade myself, alas, for I saw her falling, falling down that terrible precipice, with her poor hands stretched out in vain to save herself, and then shoot on to the gray-blue glacier and disappear. Pity me, dear Fred; pity me! Not only could I do nothing—I could not even *think* for her; not, indeed, that thought could have availed her — but I knelt down upon that fatal ridge, and gazed and gazed till I seemed to see the whole dreadful thing, as in a dream, pass before my eyes again and again; and yet I knew all the while that she was lying in the depths of some crevasse, a corpse, and colder than any corpse. I cannot tell you how long I thus remained, and hardly what I did, when I came to my wretched self. But I got down the peak somehow, the same way as we had ascended

it, though with infinite difficulty, for I trembled in every limb, and then — you will say — returned to the hotel for aid. That is what has already been said to me: 'Why did you not return at once?' If aid had then been possible, doubtless I should have done so; but if my darling had had fifty lives, they must all have been lost long since, not to mention that it would have taken me hours, in the condition to which grief and terror had reduced me, to reach the inn at all, and she all the while deep down in the cruel ice. I could not bear to leave the spot; I strove to get on to where I thought she was, and called her name a hundred times; but she was dumb.

How I got home myself I cannot tell, or how the hours passed in the mean time. It was moonlight when I arrived there somehow, and not in my senses even then; for it seems I must have gone straight to her room—the people of the inn being all

in bed, and its door as usual unfastened—as though to assure myself that I had indeed been witness to what seemed still a nightmare vision too terrible for reality. But the next minute I had roused the house, and told them all.

Though Nature is so cruel—can I ever forget the cold and glittering beauty of that hateful glacier, whose ravening maw had swallowed up my darling, as I saw it that night by moonlight?—Man is kind; and a party was formed at once to go and search for Jane. So weak and exhausted was I, that I had to be carried on men's shoulders; for, of course, my presence was necessary in order to identify the fatal spot. Ill and bewildered as I was, there was no difficulty in that. I should have known it, I do believe, blindfold. But though we had ropes and appliances of all kinds, and bold men, whose services I feel no money can repay, who suffered themselves to be lowered down, down into those icy depths, it

was all in vain. They came up numb and half-dead themselves, and reported that they had not neared the bottom of that ghastly grave. I have said that she was dead and lost. There she lies yet, Fred, and will lie, perchance, until the judgment-day, unless, as is said, the slow-moving glacier, scores of years to come, shall bring her dear remains to light, to the eyes of an unborn generation. If the news of such a catastrophe is awful to you, what then, think you, must the event itself have been to *me*, the helpless witness of it! My nerves are shattered and gone. You will see me an altered man, Fred; but you will see me soon. I cannot bear this loneliness any longer, or remain here, now that all has been accomplished which is practicable—I refer to the attempts to recover the body. I have been assured this morning by a delegate from a sort of committee of guides, who have been engaged in this sad service, that there is not the faintest hope of suc-

cess. I shall start for London to-morrow, and arrive in Merton-square on the heels of this letter. I know I shall find a welcome there—a place of rest after this heavy trouble. It is no longer a sharp pain, as at first, which consumes me; my existence is become an aching void. But these are words of little meaning; only when you see me will you be able to discern what has been wrought in me by the events of the last few days. I have not heard news of you for a month; no doubt in consequence of our late erratic movements, and not of any neglect on your part. Heaven grant that with you, at least, all is well!—Believe me, my dear Fred, in my present wretchedness, even more than of old, to be yours ever faithfully, CECIL WRAY.

Poor Cecil! How thoroughly I sympathised with him! how deeply I pitied him! Never in my young life had I read any words that so affected me as these.

And yet, though the letter was full of feeling, it seemed a curiously reticent one. My cousin had scarcely ever written to me before without some tender allusion to his sister's affection for myself; and *now* of all times, when she was dead and gone, it was to have been expected that he would have referred to it. Poor Jane! Her courage I had never doubted, nor had I been surprised to hear of her accompanying her brother in perilous places; but I should have thought he would have insisted upon their having guides. I had begged of him, while in South America, not to be so venturesome; and it was unlike him to have neglected any appeal of mine. 'Never fear; *you shall see my face again*,' he had written back, half in jest; and though I was about to do so, he had little thought that I should see *his* face only, without that other one, which had been almost as constant to it as its own shadow.

Well, we would do all we could for him

with willing hearts. Aunt Ben would welcome him as of old; and Eleanor (whom, since he had not heard from us of late, he would not expect to find with us) would hold out a sisterly hand to him, though she might never supply his sister's place.

All next day, and the next, we three could talk of nothing but of Jane's awful fate. We dwelt upon the good that was in her—her courage, her resolution, her devotion to her brother, and even on her accomplishments, such as music, down to the patient toil she used to bestow on the intricacies of her Chinese puzzle; and we forgot, or strove to do so, all her faults. As time went on, in every hour of which we looked for my cousin's coming, we still talked of her, but more at large.

Aunt Ben's affection for Cecil was great and genuine, as I have said; but, of course, she did not entertain the love for him which friendship had grafted in *me*. She knew of poor Jane's old *tendresse* (how old it

seemed!) for myself; but it did not seem to her now as it did to me. She discoursed, therefore, upon the calamity with less of reverence, if I may use the word, than I did. It is the nature of women, I think, to treat such matters with more familiarity than men use; and her words sometimes jarred upon me. I was much annoyed by one observation of hers in particular, which seemed to me in very bad taste. I can apply to it no worse terms; for 'heartless' I knew it was not. 'Only think,' said she, 'if this shocking accident had happened to her brother, instead of poor Jane, how rich you would have been, Fred!'

I replied with indignation that I would not have had it so for a million of money. The very idea of such a thing seemed to freeze my blood, just as it had, to do her justice, frozen Aunt Ben's when she thought the letter had come from Jane.

'I believe it, my dear Fred,' returned my aunt; 'your friendship is a right loyal

one; else it might have occurred to some people in your position, debarred—at all events for the present—by lack of means from wedding such a girl as our Eleanor—'

'My dear Aunt Ben,' broke in Nelly, 'I should not love Fred, if I thought him capable of harbouring such a thought.'

A reply so creditable to my darling, that I thought it only right to reward her for it with a kiss.

Another, and another day, and yet no Cecil. At last a letter from him, from Paris—where he had been taken ill, it seemed—to say he would be with us that evening, but not to dinner. We dined, therefore, as usual; and afterwards all three remained below stairs, because the dining-room window looked into the square, and we could watch for him. It was autumn, and the nights were fast drawing in. It grew almost dark; and yet we did not ring to have the shutters closed, nor the lamp lit. It seemed better that he should come

to us in the gray twilight somehow, and not show every seam that sorrow might have made in his poor face to our tearful eyes at first.

The long-expected cab at last drew up at the door; and the next instant we heard Cecil's voice — very sad and broken, it seemed, but still unmistakably his. As he came into the room, I threw myself into his arms.

'Dear Cecil,' cried I, 'welcome home!'

Considering the cause that had brought him, it was impossible to say more. Surely it could not be that he thought my words less warm than they might have been, but I fancied that he did not return my hand-grasp with responsive cordiality. I did not then know that grief is called 'bitter' because it sometimes makes acrid the sweet waters of the soul. The next instant, however, he was himself again, and sobbed out,

'God bless you, Fred!' then hid himself in the arms of good Aunt Ben.

'You are better, I trust?' said she, her usual good sense at once suggesting allusion to his own recent indisposition, and avoiding for the moment the more painful subject.

'Yes; I am well enough now,' said he wearily; 'that is, what there *is* of me.'

Indeed, he looked shrunk and pale enough, and, in fact, what he had warned us that we should see him, 'an altered man.' He had not grown a beard, as travelled people often do; but the wholesome colour that life at Gatcombe had given to him was, so far as I could judge by that dim light, quite gone. He looked more like what he was when he had first come from India; and through that association he seemed, curiously enough, a younger man. But the lines in his face had, on the other hand, aged him much; and the tremor of his limbs, and the unsteady accents of his tongue, corroborated only too well the words of his own letter, 'my nerves are shaken and gone.'

Eleanor had hitherto remained in the background; but now she came forward with extended hand, just as the servant was bringing in the lighted lamp.

'Who is this?' cried Cecil, starting back almost, as it seemed, in alarm.

'Why, it's Nelly, to be sure,' said I, unconsciously adopting a soothing tone; for, for the moment, it really struck me that my poor cousin's brain was affected.

'O, yes; I forgot. I—I beg your pardon,' stammered Cecil. 'I did not expect to see *you* here, Eleanor;' and he kissed her cheek.

'O, yes,' said Aunt Ben cheerfully; 'Nelly is one of us now; as you would have heard, had you received our last letter.'

'One of *you?*' gasped he, looking at me as if for an explanation. 'What does she mean?'

'She is living with us, under my aunt's roof at present, Cecil.'

'Living *here!*' exclaimed my cousin ex-

citedly. Then, turning round to the servant, he cried: 'Stop the cab!—do you hear me?—or call another. Don't take my luggage upstairs. I won't have it!'

It was plain to us now that there was something wrong with poor Cecil's brain: it must have given way under the pressure of his grief; or perhaps it was owing to his late illness, which might have been sunstroke. Eleanor slipped out of the room at once, and my aunt motioned the servant to go away.

'My dear Cecil,' said she quietly, 'why should you refuse to stay here because Eleanor is with us?'

Cecil pointed to me with a shaking finger, and murmured hoarsely:

'*He* knows why.'

Then I perceived, for the first time, what was the real state of affairs. My cousin's mind was wholly taken up with the thoughts of his lost sister: he had been her confidant with respect to her affection

for myself, and he could not just now endure to live under the same roof with her who had won the love I had denied to Jane. It was very sad and painful; but, knowing Cecil's sensitive nature as I did, it seemed characteristic enough.

'I know to what you refer, Cecil,' said I; 'or I think I do; but I do trust you will not allow a morbid sentiment to affect you so deplorably.'

Cecil had fallen into a chair and hidden his face — the very picture of despairing woe.

'Bear with me, both of you, for a little,' groaned he. 'I will see her to-morrow. Yes, yes; we shall be good friends, as of old, no doubt, in time; but I cannot live here. If there is an inn near, I will go there, please.'

We thought it right not to argue with him farther; and apartments were secured for him at a neighbouring hotel for the night. After this had been arranged, he

seemed to grow calmer, discoursed of the catastrophe which had deprived him of his *alter ego* with greater self-command than could have been expected of him; and we felt tolerably convinced that our fears had been groundless with respect to his state of mind. Some refreshment was brought in for him, of which he ate but little; though he drank more wine than he had been used to drink; and after more talk in excited tones concerning Jane, he presently withdrew to his hotel, promising to breakfast with us the ensuing morning.

CHAPTER III.

JUST IN TIME.

Of course, poor Cecil's conduct distressed us all very much; but we sympathised far too deeply with the cause of it to feel angry with him. I confess I felt a little sore upon dear Nelly's account; for it seemed a cruel thing that she, who had no other home than ours, should be made to feel that her presence was an obstacle to my cousin's reception there. But Nelly behaved like an angel: she kept out of Cecil's way as much as possible; and when she was compelled to be in his company, as at meals, she showed a tact and delicacy that drew forth from Aunt Ben, when she and I were alone together, the warmest eulo-

giums. Cecil, on his part, I do honestly believe, did his best to get over his most unwarrantable prejudice, and was studiously polite and civil to her, as though desirous to make amends for that first outbreak; but his behaviour, at the best, was only like that of a gentleman of courtly manners, and those somewhat stiff. His old genial tone was gone, as regarded Nelly, altogether, and sadly altered with respect to Aunt Ben and myself. I am bound to say that, so far as feeling went, I think he loved me no less than of old; but the tender frankness that had formerly characterised him had now given place to a melancholy reserve. He had been wont to be a great talker, and his laugh (before the occurrence of that miserable affair at Gatcombe, which had exiled him from home and country and sweetheart, and been indirectly the cause of his sister's death) had been one of those cheery ones which win answering echoes from those who hear it; but he was very

silent now; and if he smiled, it was easy to see the effort that it cost him to do so. It was not likely, we thought, that he would be interested with ordinary topics; and, besides, we felt a delicacy in discussing them in his presence; and so it happened that our constant talk was about poor Jane; so that we became a very mournful little company.

After dinner, over a cigar — I say *a* cigar, for my cousin never smoked, which at this time was certainly a misfortune for him, when he stood so much in need of solace — Cecil would emerge a little from his shell of reticence (or perhaps it was I who drew him out, as it were, by the horns), and talk of his South-American experiences; but any reference to Gatcombe seemed distasteful to him, though I studiously avoided such recollections of the place as were not immediately connected with his sister. He answered in monosyllables, and at times seemed to be quite oblivious

to what I was talking about. I reminded him of the old days when we used to Beaumont-and-Fletcher it together; but it touched no responsive chord, though he professed a great interest in my present dramatic fortunes, and listened with attention when I spoke of them. (How little he guessed, poor fellow, that the successful young actress to whom I hoped to be indebted for my introduction to the stage—for the Hole-in-the-Wall *fiasco* I counted as nothing—was his own Ruth!) He seemed almost to have lost his memory for all events in which Jane had had no share. So curious an instance of this occurred one day, that the idea that his brain was affected again intruded itself upon my mind, and gave me great uneasiness. It happened in this way. One of my early attempts at dramatic writing was a sort of burlesque in verse, on the subject of Bluebeard. Before the wicked villain was slain, the avenging brothers were made to discuss his charac-

ter: in speaking of the airs he gave himself, one described him rather wittily as

'A wretched Cove who thinks himself a Bey;'

and *apropos* to something Cecil and I were discoursing about, I quoted this line, and asked him if he remembered it.

'Of course I do,' said he; 'I remember I used to think it one of your very best.'

'But it was not mine at all,' returned I.

'Indeed!' said he. 'Whose was it?'

'Why, *yours*,' answered I, in great surprise (and, indeed, not without some trepidation on his account). 'Don't you remember coming to my room at Gatcombe, with the slip of paper in your hand, with that very line written out upon it, and telling me that the words had suddenly struck you, and that you had been afraid of forgetting them? Why, my dear Cecil, you must surely remember *that?*'

'No,' said my cousin, smiling faintly, and with a strange pained look. 'I re-

member nothing now, except what I would wish to forget.'

'You surely do not forget Ruth Waller?' said I significantly. It struck me that it was better to speak plainly with him, and also, upon my own account, I was very eager to get that subject over: he might otherwise allude to it at a less opportune moment, and detect in me some signs of embarrassment.

'Forget her? Great heaven! never!' cried he. He trembled in every limb; his accents were those of positive terror.

'Do you wish to forget her, then?' said I. 'Is it possible that this misfortune of yours should not only disincline you towards your old friends—'

'Misfortune!' echoed Cecil, interrupting me.

'Well, my friend, call it what you will. This catastrophe, then, which fills all of us with terror and regret,—I say, are you going to permit it to make your whole life miser-

able — to chill your heart against love itself ?'

'Do not talk to me of love, Fred,' said he, trembling again; 'that is over and done with.'

'You think so now,' said I. 'But all wounds heal in time; and supposing that this mystery of Waller's death should be cleared up—'

'It never will be,' broke in Cecil in a hollow voice. 'It never can be!'

'Nay, but if it *should* be, and Ruth were to be found—'

'I do not desire to meet her,' interrupted he. 'I tell you that, if she were found to-morrow, I would not see her!'

He spoke with passionate energy, as though he would have made up by force of expression for his lack of fixed resolve; for it was monstrous, I thought, that the antipathy entertained by his sister against Ruth should affect him seriously for long. For the present, however, it was evidently

better to avoid this subject. My allusion to it seemed to have already disturbed him greatly; for he rose, and proposed our joining the ladies, much before our usual time. As a rule, he preferred to be alone with me, as I have said, though he did not smoke.

We found Eleanor at the piano, and I asked Cecil to play an accompaniment with her on the flute. He shook his head. 'I have quite forgotten my flute-playing,' said he; 'it would be useless to attempt it.' Then he whispered to me that that was not his true reason for declining, but that he would never play the flute again, because he had been wont to do so with Jane only.

'That is another pleasure sacrificed to a morbid idea,' said I. 'Your sorrow takes an unhealthy form, indeed.' I suppose I spoke rather sharply (and I own I was getting somewhat impatient at his conduct); for I saw a keen expression of pain come into his face. 'Forgive me, my dear Cecil,' continued I; 'but I do hope you are not

serious in what you say. To give up your music would, just now, be indeed bad for you.'

'If you think so,' said he submissively, 'I will not give it up.' And presently, when Nelly left her seat, he sat down at the instrument and played a few pieces. I noticed that he chose those of which his sister used to be fond, and not his own old favourites; and it seemed to me that his touch was improved—the reason of which was plain enough: he played, as the critics say, 'with feeling.'

'Do you remember the last time I ever heard you play, Cecil?' said I, as I leaned over him.

'Yes,' he said; 'it was this, was it not?' His fingers struck out at once, 'And ye shall walk in silk attire.' It was the tune he had played that night at Gatcombe when he had announced his determination to marry Ruth; and even now, at the last verse,

'And ere I'm found to break my faith,
I'll lay me doun and dee,'

that look of tender resolve which he had worn when he played it then came once more into his face.

Now, if he had really given up all thought of Ruth, how could this have been?

Cecil's conduct altogether, in short, was not only strange, but inconsistent; and I put this down, at first, to the struggle in his own mind between his natural inclination and the course he had imposed upon himself to take, out of respect for Jane's memory. In time, I thought, the former would gain the upper hand, and he would be himself again. But in this, it seemed, I was mistaken. A very curious phase began to exhibit itself in my cousin's character, and one of the existence of which I (who had fancied I knew him so well) had certainly never dreamed. He began to show an alacrity in business matters; not exactly

a passion for money, but an interest in it, which he had never showed before. It was only with the utmost difficulty that my father had been able to get him to listen to any statement of his own affairs; whereas now he seemed to like nothing so well as to make appointments with his lawyer, Mr. Clote—the same whom my uncle had named as trustee to the twins in conjunction with my father—and to discourse of the great property that would accrue to him upon his coming of age. Though this puzzled us, we were all inclined to think it a good sign, for we had begun to despair of the poor fellow's becoming interested in anything; but, unhappily, he pushed this interest so far beyond all reasonable limits, that it began to injure his whole character. It became plain to me that my once kind, generous, impulsive friend was becoming—it is a harsh word, and I was very slow to use it—purse-proud. Though I am sure he entertained all his old affection for me, he

wanted to be something besides my friend —something which is not only very different from but incompatible with friendship — namely, my patron. He knew that I was comparatively poor; and starting upon those premises, he took upon himself not only to administer lectures upon my improvidence generally, but actually had the bad taste to warn me against contracting marriage upon slender means. I could scarcely believe my ears, when they heard him. For the first time in my life, I was seriously angry with my cousin; still, I remembered the heavy blow that had befallen him — though not by this time what could be called recently—and for the sake of the old days, and because he was under my own roof, I hesitated to express what I felt. Unhappily he took my silence for a sign that I was willing to hear more on the same theme. 'You must not think,' said he, 'that I am actuated by any feeling against Eleanor in the advice I have ventured to

give you; I should say the same if you had imprudently engaged yourself to any other young lady with insufficient means.'

'You are most generous, Cecil,' said I coldly, 'with your advice; but—'

'Excuse me,' interrupted he with haste: 'do not mistake me, Fred; not only my advice, but all else that belongs to me is equally at your service. I should not think it right—from principle, I assure you, and not from any morbid antipathy, such as you may imagine—to make over to you, for example, any large sum to enable you to marry Eleanor—'

'Cecil,' cried I, 'are you drunk or mad, that you dare to speak to me in this manner?'

'Hear me out, hear me out!' answered he excitedly: 'I was about to add that, for your own benefit—to do you certain good—there is no sum within my means that I would hesitate to give you.'

'Cecil,' said I, speaking under great excitement, 'you have destroyed, by your

last five minutes' talk, the work of years of friendship. You told me in your letter from Switzerland to expect to find you another man; I am sorry to say that that expectation is fulfilled. You have spoken what no gentleman should speak—what should never, for an instant, have even entered into his mind. You have proposed to yourself to bribe me with your money to give up my promised bride. And why? Because, forsooth, Jane was jealous of her! If your sister's memory urges you thus to disgrace yourself, the sooner you forget her the better. To be plain with you (for you have earned plainness), her influence with you was always for evil; and now that she is dead, she seems to be doing you more harm than she did when alive. I have borne with your morbid fancies long enough. I will not have them brought to bear against my darling, who is worth ten thousand Janes —nor, when I have said that, have I estimated Nelly very highly!'

It was a most improper speech to make to my guest and sorely-stricken friend; and the instant it had hurried from my lips, I was sorry for it. The effect upon him was quite shocking to witness: he put up his hands, to shield himself from those sharp words, as though they had been visible arrows.

'Spare me, spare me!' cried he bitterly: 'you have said enough!'

'I had no intention to say more, or to hurt your feelings at all, Cecil,' said I; 'but you drove me to do so. If you have a regard for me, as you profess (and which I do not doubt), you should have also some consideration for her with whom my life is henceforth to be bound up. You should not have supposed that I would have given her up for any reason on earth, and far less have insulted me by offering me money to do so. I own, however, I was wrong to use such words about Jane. I did not, it is true, entertain much affection for her: nobody

did, Cecil, as you well know, except yourself; but it is not right to say harsh things of the dead.'

It was not so much anger against Cecil (though I was still very angry) that caused me to speak so plainly, as a desire to strike, once for all, and for all our sakes, against these eternal references to his lost sister. My words had in the end the desired result, for he became for the future almost reticent regarding her; but, in the mean time, their effect was far beyond what I had intended. Cecil seemed literally to shrink into himself; he strove to speak, and failed; then, white and trembling, he arose, and had passed swiftly out of the room and out of the house, bareheaded, and taken a cab to his hotel, or elsewhere, before I could think of what to say or to do.

To Nelly I was obliged to explain his precipitate departure upon the ground of sudden indisposition, for I could not, of course, reveal to her what had in reality

caused it; but to Aunt Ben I confided all. Devoted to Eleanor, of whose merits, since she had been an inmate of our house, she was more convinced than ever, my aunt by no means blamed the sharpness which I had used on her behalf; but, on the other hand, she expressed herself as seriously apprehensive of its effect upon Cecil.

'Yes,' said I gloomily; 'he will never forgive me. Instead of our old friendship re-awakening, as I had hoped it would in time, I fear that we have killed it between us.'

'No, no,' said Aunt Ben positively; 'there is no fear of that; all the affection that is left in the poor lad is concentrated upon yourself. But I think you should see him again to-night, after what has happened.'

'But we had no quarrel,' argued I; 'or rather, *I*, at least, have said nothing that I wish to unsay.'

'My dear Fred,' returned Aunt Ben

gravely, 'that is not the question. I do not blame you for feeling as you do, nor wonder that my suggestion is distasteful to you. But Cecil is not himself; he has no one with him, and he conceives that he has mortally offended the only friend he has in the world. There is no knowing, in his morbid and excited state, what rash act he may not be capable of committing.

'If I thought *that*—' said I, with hesitation.

'Well, *I* think so, Fred. If it is only an old woman's fancy, you have given in to such already many a time' (here she kissed my forehead); 'it is only doing so once more: for my sake, follow him. He has left his hat: let that be your excuse, if your pride insists on one; but pray, go at once.'

I went, of course. A thousand times since then have I blessed Aunt Ben for making me do so. The conviction that she was right was strengthened with every step

I took; and before I had reached the hotel, the likelihood of the peril at which she had hinted was only too apparent to me. I ran upstairs unannounced, and opened his sitting-room door without knocking. He was not there; but I heard him moving about in his bedroom beyond. The two rooms communicated with one another. Upon the table lay the old-fashioned desk which had been his father's, with a letter on it, the address of which—and it was my own—was not yet dry. I hesitated as to whether or not I should read the contents, doubting if I was privileged to do so; and also reflecting, if they should be words of farewell, would it not distress him, if all should still be made right, to know that I had perused them? Most fortunately, as I now think, I decided not to do so. I stepped to the bedroom and tried the handle of the door; it was not locked, and I softly opened it an inch or two, and put my foot in, so that it could not be closed against me. Then, in

a voice which I did not recognise myself, so overcome was I with anxiety, I called 'Cecil!'

There was a sound of some metal falling on the ground—a razor as I rightly guessed—and on the instant, I rushed in headlong. My cousin was alive and untouched; but his bared throat, and the weapon lying on the floor, were proofs of how narrowly I had escaped being too late. The situation was terrible enough; but not even the expectation of immediate death, I should have thought, and by self-murder, could have imprinted on human countenance such unutterable terror as that with which my cousin now regarded me.

Startled from his purpose, I suppose, by the sudden utterance of his own name, he had fallen back against the bed, and there remained, half standing, half supported by it, speechless and staring. To give him time to collect himself, I picked up the razor, and put it into its case; then I ad-

vanced towards him, holding out my hand. He motioned me away with a frantic gesture.

'Have you read that letter?' said he in hoarse low tones.

'No, Cecil.'

'Upon your solemn oath?'

'Yes,' said I, 'if you wish to have it. I thought that I was not privileged to do so. But,' added I reprovingly, 'I can guess its contents only too well.'

'Ah!' He gave a sigh of intense relief, took out his handkerchief, to wipe the perspiration that covered his forehead, and rose feebly to his feet. 'It was very, very wicked of me, Fred,' said he; 'a minute later, and we should both have got our deserts. You would have had wealth—the means of happiness, in your case—and I—I should have been a lost soul!'

Shocked as I was, it struck me as very strange that at such a time he should be thinking of his money. It had evidently become a disease with him to do so; nor

are other cases unknown, though rare, in which excessive grief has taken that morbid form. Observing that my eyes wandered to the razor, he said: 'Never fear, Fred; I will not listen to that devil again.'

By the razor was a Bible, with the name of the hotel stamped upon it—I seem to read it now—and it suggested to me what I thought an excellent idea.

'You talked of taking oaths,' said I, 'a minute ago. Well, you shall swear *that*, or else, as sure as you are still alive, I will call for help, and give you into custody for a madman. You dare not break an oath, I know, and indeed there was a time when your bare word would have sufficed me. Come, swear to me that you will never attempt your life again.'

Cecil took the book, readily enough, then looked at me, as if in ignorance of how to proceed.

'You must do as the witnesses did in Batty's trial,' said I.

'What did they do?' said he. 'I have forgotten it.'

I thought this a mere excuse for delay; for it seemed incredible he could have forgotten any incident in an affair so important to himself, and of which I remembered every detail.

'You must kiss the book,' said I, 'and say: "I will never attempt my life with my own hand again, so help me God."'

He kissed the book, and repeated the words readily enough, but with this addition: 'Unless circumstances should arise which should make it, in my Cousin Frederick's eyes, the best thing for me to do.'

'That can never be,' said I coolly, for I did not wish to excite him unnecessarily by remonstrance. He seemed to me to be standing on the very boundary-line between sanity and madness.

'If it can never be, Fred, then there can be no harm in making the proviso.'

'Neither harm nor good,' assented I.

'You look very ill and worn, Cecil; I shall now leave you to your repose, in complete confidence in the word that you have passed to your Creator.'

'Yes, yes; I will keep that,' said Cecil slowly.

I would have shaken him by the hand then and there, and left him, but he insisted on accompanying me to the door of the sitting-room. As he did so, I saw his eyes glance anxiously at the letter on the desk, and lighten up as it fell on the unbroken seal; but though this pained me, as implying a doubt of my veracity, I took no notice of it. If there was much to forgive in my poor cousin's conduct, there was much reason for forgiveness; and I resolved to keep even from Aunt Ben what I had just seen and heard.

CHAPTER IV.

'I WILL GO WITH THE REST TO-MORROW.'

For some days after the occurrence I have narrated, Cecil kept to his own apartments at the hotel, where I took an occasional meal with him alone; and before he felt sufficiently himself to revisit our house, an event took place which, for the present, removed from it the chief cause of his disinclination to do so. A telegram arrived for Nelly from the Gatcombe doctor, desiring her immediate presence at her grandfather's bedside: the old man was dying, and had expressed an earnest wish to see her. Of course, she did not hesitate for a moment to obey such a summons; and as it was obvious she could not go alone, for many

reasons—Sir Richard Harewood was still at the Manor-house, for one—Aunt Ben volunteered to accompany her, and what was a feat very creditable to the sex, which, with all its virtues, is apt to be a little slow in movements of departure, the two started off together within three-quarters of an hour of the receipt of the news. Thus it happened that Cecil and I were thrown more together alone than we had been even in the old Gatcombe days. Of course, after what had happened, I could not leave him to himself, even if I had wished to do so; and I did not wish it, partly on his own account, and partly because the only business of importance that called me from him gave me great embarrassment to pursue it; for the business was no other than the preparation of my play of the *Foot-page*, under the superintendence of Miss Brabant of the Corintheum, and the embarrassment arose from the fact, that Ruth was evincing a great desire to see Cecil—who was still un-

aware of my having discovered in the successful actress his old flame—and I had not the courage to tell her that his heart (though it might love her still, as of yore) was more steeled against her love than ever.

This change in her feelings towards him was caused, curiously enough, by the same event which had made him more obstinate not to press his suit; namely, the death of Jane. Even if the mystery of Richard Waller's fate should be cleared up, there would still now remain, as my cousin had himself told me, a positive disinclination to meet Ruth, upon the ground of his dead sister's strong dislike to her; and this was not so pleasant a piece of news to communicate that I should willingly put myself in the way of having it extracted by cross-examination. That Ruth would cross-examine me, I was convinced; for she had already put some leading questions, which I had had some difficulty to answer, in the single interview I had had with her since Cecil's

return. It was clear to me she wished to see him, and, as I thought, counted upon her novel charms — for her beauty was greatly heightened by tasteful attire and ornament, and her conversation had acquired, in the forcing-house of theatrical life, a piquancy quite incredible, considering the short space of time that had elapsed since she was a mere village girl—to quench the faint embers of morbid feeling that might still remain to him, now that Jane was no longer at his side to fan them and keep them aglow. What added to my perplexity still more, was that Cecil, on his part, was somewhat desirous to see Miss Brabant, albeit he would on no account have been present (though, goodness knows, rehearsals are not gaieties) even at the rehearsal of my play. It was astounding, now that we were left alone together, how his old interest in my affairs began to show itself. He made me tell him the whole lamentable story of the enactment of the

Pedlar's Pack at the Hole-in-the-Wall, and was even won to smiles by its recital. Fortunately, the delays and mismanagement incidental to all theatrical proceedings postponed from week to week the bringing out of the *Foot-page*, and afforded an excuse for keeping Cecil and Miss Brabant apart; and in the mean time, circumstances were occurring at Gatcombe that might well demand my undivided attention.

When Nelly arrived at the Rectory, she found the old man speechless, and apparently dying, in consequence of a paralytic seizure. He knew her, it was plain, and seemed, by the expression of his distorted face, to welcome her; the designed mention of her name by the good doctor in his presence had indeed been the first thing to recall him to consciousness, and our old friend had thereupon taken the responsibility of telegraphing to us at once; but Mr. Bourne was quite incapable of communicating his wishes more particularly. He could not

stir a finger-joint, nor voluntarily wink an eyelid. The frame of iron had given way in all its parts with simultaneous completeness; the will alone was left as strong as ever, but powerless. Others could read its existence in the anxious fire of his sleepless eyes, but they could not, or would not, translate it. His punishment had indeed begun; for what must such as he have suffered, to know himself about to perish without sign, his last consuming desire unsatisfied, his last command unobeyed, because not understood! That he was reconciled with his grand-daughter was evident from the yearning glances that he threw towards her while she sat beside him, and the despairing look he wore whenever she left the room, even for a moment; and at last it struck the doctor that what lay so heavy on the sick man's mind must needs be in connection with her. Having come to this sagacious conclusion, he communicated it privately to Aunt Ben, with the

following result (as I afterwards learned from her own lips).

'Man alive!' answered she impatiently, 'do you suppose I do not know it, or that poor Nelly yonder does not know it? I can tell you much more than that. Do you not see how, when his eyes are not upon her, they rove to the big escritoire, in which he keeps his papers, and from it to the fire-place, and back, and back again. He wants to burn his will!'

At this, the doctor slapped his knee so vigorously that it made Nelly start in her chair by the sick man's pillow.

'Miss Wray,' said he, 'Master Fred may be the genius of the family, but you've got all the common sense. You're right, no doubt. What a shame, and what a pity it seems! I suppose it would not be permissible to—eh? But, of course, it wouldn't.'

'If one could give him speech but for one minute!' mused my aunt; 'or, still better, strength to enable him to make half-

a-dozen strokes with his pen, they would be worth ten thousand pounds apiece to Nelly yonder.'

'If you promised me the money for myself, Miss Wray,' returned the doctor gravely, 'I could not do it.'

'I know it,' sighed she. 'Then don't let us speak about it any more.' And they did not; nor was it till years afterwards that Aunt Ben confided to me the bitter disappointment she had experienced on my account, and how very narrowly my Nelly had missed being a great heiress.

At last, the old man died; and his heaped-up wealth was found to be bequeathed to strangers. Most of it — curiously enough in one who had never cared in life for the respect of his fellow-men — was devoted to the preservation of his name as a public benefactor. Five thousand pounds went to the erection of the Bourne Fountain in the market-place of Monkton — a bronze erection of great pretensions,

but which, in consequence of some complication in the machinery, is generally dry; a like sum was left to found a Bourne Chair of Political Economy in the Antipodes; and the rest fell to existing public charities, always with the proviso that, year by year, remembrance should be made of him who gave it.

'To my granddaughter Eleanor Bourne, who has displeased me,' was left the sum of one hundred pounds sterling; which subsequently purchased her *trousseau.*

All this was no worse than what I had expected for Nelly; and, as I told Cecil, I only blamed myself for having so long put off our marriage, in hopes of conciliating the old man.

'You are still but boy and girl, dear Fred,' observed he quietly.

'While you will be of age in a few weeks,' answered I, smiling, for I was fully resolved for the future to take all that he might say upon this matter in good part,

if it should be possible to do so. 'I can remember the time, Cecil, when you yourself thought of marriage, though younger than I am now. You had always money, to be sure; but there were as great obstacles in your case as the want of it: whereas, in ours, there is nothing else to hinder us; and even as regards means, we have enough to live upon in a simple way. Besides, who knows but that the *Foot-page* may turn out a gold mine!'

'That is true,' said he thoughtfully; 'who knows!'

It was a great comfort to me, upon Nelly's account, to feel that, though the idea of our marriage might be still distasteful to him, he had at least given up all thoughts of opposition to it. Notwithstanding this, however, I could see that the return of Eleanor from Gatcombe began at once to affect his spirits unfavourably, and that he soon shrank again, as before, within his shell of reticence and reserve.

But for this conduct upon Cecil's part, which gave me great pain, no matter how I strove to account for it, my life would now have been one of almost unmixed happiness. My marriage with Nelly was fixed for the ensuing spring; and, in the mean time, the darling object of my labours for the last two years was about to be realised in the appearance of the *Foot-page* at the Corintheum. Old Magnus, who had proved so deaf and inexorable when he had had to deal with an unknown author, was like clay to the potter in the hands of 'the Brabant,' and was all civility to her protégé —myself. I could not help alluding to the little misadventure of the *Pedlar's Pack;* but he escaped from the subject in a glowing eulogium upon Lady Repton, through whose kind offices, it will be remembered, I had at last obtained from him the return of that pearl of plays, since cast upon the dunghill at the Hole-in-the-Wall. I had written to her ladyship to inform her of

the acceptance of my present play, and reminded her of her promise to come up to town to see it brought out; and, much to my satisfaction, she had announced her intention of doing so. His lordship was laid up with a fit of the gout, but had given her leave of absence for a few days, which she was to spend under our own roof—a visit to which I looked forward with much greater pleasure than did her would-not-have-been hostess.

Dear Aunt Ben would as soon have parted with an article of her faith as with a prejudice; each one was vital with her, and she clung to it like a shipwrecked man to a buoy at sea. She was sometimes apparently convinced by argument, and the buoy went under—for a moment—but up it bobbed again the next, and there she was holding on by its rusty iron ring as fast as ever. Lady Repton was one of her 'horrors.' The rehearsals, to which an author was invited without his wife, was

another. These performances, in sober truth, are, for the most part, neither meretricious nor attractive. To behold a young lady in fashionable morning attire playing a foot-page of the epoch of the Restoration, is not a captivating spectacle; to find one's principal actor entirely mistaking the character he is called upon to play, and yet so vain and obstinate that it is impossible to correct him, and dangerous to call him a fool, is not to plunge into a vortex of pleasure; nor to any one short of a cynic is it agreeeable to find oneself the modest pivot around which a system of naked jealousies and very thinly-clad downright hates revolve. The old man and his ass is a faint figure to image the position of a dramatic author at a rehearsal; for while it is not less difficult to please everybody than it was for the sage in the fable, it is absolutely impossible for him to please the ass.

However, this by the way, for our story

concerns itself not with my affairs, but with those of Cousin Cecil. He visited us now more seldom than ever, and resolutely refused all invitations to partake of our little gaieties. Mr. Burder, for example, though he had not dared to show himself since that Southwark fiasco, would still send us occasional orders for the theatre; and although they were not good ones—being for the upper boxes and suchlike second-floor situations—we took advantage of them, and by paying the difference of price, obtained good places cheaply; an object which, with matrimony drawing near, it was become desirable to effect. Cecil would never accompany us on these occasions, and rarely even dined with us, unless we were quite alone. However, on the day of Lady Repton's arrival, which was that preceding the production of my play, I insisted upon his meeting so old a friend, and after some demur, he consented to do so.

Lady Repton looked not a day older

than when I had last seen her, and was as sprightly as ever. She gave some imitations of her husband during an attack of gout, which recur to my memory to this day, and never without filling my eyes with tears; they were not pathetic, however, in their character, especially when he was made to say to the footman: 'I flatter myself I have some little reputation as a philosopher, and—damme, sir, take *that*'—which was the footstool which the valet had omitted to place at the proper angle. She was laboriously civil to Aunt Ben, patronised Eleanor; and flirted with myself in the most unblushing manner. The gloom and silence of Cecil seemed to act upon her like the presence of the skeleton at the Egyptian feast; or, perhaps, it was that they heightened her merriment by contrast. She rallied him upon his performance of Ivanhoe in the old days at Gatcombe, and demanded of him the loving allegiance that he owed to her as Rowena;

but the allusion seemed only to awaken unpleasant memories, and was received with marked disfavour. Not a whit discouraged, however, her ladyship rattled on, chiefly upon that congenial theme, the stage. She had already overwhelmed me with questions about 'this Brabant,' as she called her, some of which had rather embarrassed me: 'Was she really pretty, or only young, which seems to do as well in these days? Had she any idea of acting, or was she a mere walking doll?' &c. I answered all these questions as truthfully as I could, consistent with the desire to please her ladyship, who had evidently formed no very high opinion of her present successor to the throne of public favour. But when she put the question: 'How does she dress?' I trembled because of Aunt Ben.

'O, Miss Brabant dresses with great taste,' said I; 'and, I am bound to say, always looks like a lady.'

'Tut! I mean, how does she look as a *gentleman?*' inquired her ladyship. 'Your pet page is not in petticoats, I suppose; you must have had a dress rehearsal.'

Now the fact was, that there *had* been a dress rehearsal that very afternoon, only I had not thought it worth while to mention it. Aunt Ben had been so foolishly particular, that I was quite glad to have been able hitherto to describe everybody behind the scenes as dowdy, commonplace, and unattractive; and besides, would not everybody have an opportunity of judging for themselves the very next night upon the question of attire? But Lady Repton was merciless, and I had to describe Miss Brabant's whole costume down to the chocolate tights, while my aunt pursed her lips, and even Eleanor wore two little blush-roses, which deepened into peonies when her ladyship told her 'not to mind,' since she (Lady Repton) had had personal experience that her Fred was faithful. 'I

fished for him myself, my dear, down at Gatcombe, and he never rose to the fly, nor even so much as nibbled.' This was terrible enough, but there was worse coming, for the sprightly creature suddenly turned round to Cecil, with: '*You*'re going, of course, to-morrow night, sir, with the rest of us *claqueurs?*'

'No,' stammered Cecil, turning quite pale beneath her flashing eyes. 'I have no spirits for it. I think I shall be better at home.'

'What!—not going to see your best friend's first piece brought out?' cried she impetuously. 'Are you afraid of its being a failure, then? Why, that is only another reason why you should go, to give him the help of your hands.'

'Indeed,' said Cecil hastily, 'I am not afraid of that. Fred has said himself, that if the play breaks down, it will be his own fault; so that I feel quite certain of its success.'

'Then why not go?' insisted her ladyship, who, to my great distress, was evidently getting angry upon my account. 'If you are in bad spirits, that is no reason why you should neglect your duties—for it *is* a duty to see your friend through his first piece.'

'Cecil has had a great trouble, you know, Lady Repton,' whispered my aunt; 'and it weighs upon him still.'

'I know that well, my dear madam,' replied her ladyship softly. 'But, in my humble judgment, you are all going the wrong way to work with him.' Then she whispered something into Cecil's ear which made him crimson. I guessed what it was, though I trust no one else did. She told him that if his sister Jane had been alive, the very woman for whose sake he was debarring himself from this pleasure, she would have been the first to have gone to see my play, and done her very best for it. 'Come,' continued she aloud; 'you will

not refuse me now, Mr. Cecil; I charge you, upon your allegiance.'

And, to the surprise and horror of us all, Cecil answered humbly:

'Very well, Lady Repton. If you think it right, I will go with the rest to-morrow to see Fred's play.'

She as little thought, of course (since we had not told her about Ruth), what she was asking him, as did he what he had consented to do.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIRST NIGHT OF THE 'FOOT-PAGE.'

It may be, and doubtless is, a vain and pitiful confession to make, but I honestly believe there are few things so personally interesting in human affairs as is the first production of a play to its author. It has all the flutter and excitement of a first book, with that supplement of chance which gives whist its preëminence in interest over chess; for its first success or failure (if not its final fate) depends on many things quite independent of its merits—ability of the actors, the manner in which it is placed upon the stage, and the temper of the audience. Moreover, the mere novelist is unable to judge, except by the gradual evidence of circulation, whe-

ther his work has been acceptable or not; whereas the dramatic writer is crowned or sentenced off hand; every character he has drawn appears in flesh and blood before his judges, and is pronounced upon at once by sibilation or applause. The anticipation of all this is a very sufficient excitement for any young gentleman, especially if his future—so far as material prosperity is concerned—is to be affected, as mine was, by the result; and yet, I protest, that from the moment Cecil announced his intention of accompanying us to the theatre, my hopes and fears upon my own account were wholly swallowed up in my apprehensions upon his; for what might not be the effect upon one so sensitively organised, and in a state of mind so morbid and abnormal, in suddenly being confronted with the woman I felt sure he still adored, though he might not own it even to himself, under circumstances so strange and unexpected! Would he shrink into the

corner of the box, with a cry of wonder or horror? Or would he leap from it on to the stage, and embrace his beloved object, regardless of her ruffles and tights? In either case, the incident would be too sensational not to divide the interest of the audience, to the detriment of the piece, and especially of its heroine. I could not, of course, but regard the matter as it affected Ruth as well as Cecil. With what startling suddenness would the apparition of her old lover strike *her* also (since I had told her positively that he would not be present), and perhaps at the very moment when she most required all her professional wits; and yet, to send her word that he was coming was likely to unhinge her altogether, and not only produce the failure of the play, but damage, perhaps irretrievably, her favour with the public for the future! If this last consideration did not occur to Aunt Ben and Eleanor, they were excessively nervous, both upon my account

and Cecil's; and if we had suddenly received news that the Corintheum was in flames, and insured (for, curiously enough, no one feels for the shareholders of an insurance office), I do believe it would have been welcomed by all three of us. Lady Repton, to whom 'first nights' were familiar, and who had a friendly confidence in the merits of my play, which she had perused, was, on the other hand, in the highest spirits, and rallied us all on our pale faces.

'It'll go, Fred, it'll *go*,' said she—meaning that the piece would take—'if only Miss Brabant understands her business. Dear me, if I was but a few years younger, how I should like to be in her place, and hear you thank me when all was over!—Eleanor, my dear, have you got a wreath for him? He will be led upon the stage by the manager, like a house lamb, you know, and have to bow with his hand, so. Then aim your wreath at him like a hoop at a

la grasse stick.—Your heart is on the left side, remember, my dear Fred, and don't put your hand too low: but there, I dare-say you have been practising it all the morning.'

Her ladyship was quite in her element, for the stage was more than second nature with her, it was nature itself, and even this indirect connection with it had all the effect upon her of a cordial.

We had an excellent box, in which the three ladies occupied the front seats, while Cecil and I sat as far back as I could put the chairs—a disposition such as I knew would please him, and which, little guessing the real cause, he set down to my modesty. The first piece was a farce, upon which Lady Repton passed sharp judgment, the severity of which I am inclined to think was partly owing to the fact that nobody recognised her. She had often bewailed to me how fleeting were dramatic reputations, however great; but perhaps she had not

been without a hope that some old playgoers would have levelled their glasses in her direction, and jogging one another's elbows, whispered together that it was *She.* Those who looked towards our box, alas, were not old playgoers, but young ones, and the object of their attraction was Nelly.

At last the farce was over, and the curtain rose on the first scene of the *Footpage.* I endeavoured to fix my eyes upon the stage, but as the moment drew near for the heroine to appear, I found them involuntarily wandering towards Cecil. A burst of applause informed me that Ruth had come forward, but I could not turn them from him; the expected scene from real life had more interest for me than the mimicry of the drama, although it was the child of my own pen. To my intense relief, though likewise to my great surprise, it was evident that Cecil did not recognise Ruth. He was staring at her with interest

indeed, but without a spark of excitement, and presently he whispered smilingly: 'She acts well, Fred, and does you justice.'

The audience seemed to think so too, for the applause was loud and frequent. Even Lady Repton condescended to remark that the young woman had something beside good legs to recommend her. 'She paints but very slightly too, I perceive'—her ladyship's eyes were glued to her opera-glass—'but her hair is not her own, surely.'

'It is not,' said I, in a low voice; for Ruth was wearing black hair: of course, if she had not been doing so, Cecil must have recognised her immediately; and, even as it was, it struck me as most strange that the eye of love, proverbially so keen, should not have penetrated the disguise which had not baffled even me for long.

'I have seen that girl's face before,' said her ladyship, as she closed her glasses.

'It is not likely,' reasoned I coldly; 'for she has not played in the provinces at all. She came out in town for the first time.'

'I never forget a face,' mused her ladyship, 'and I have certainly seen hers; but where or when it was, I cannot call to mind.'

I trembled; for if Lady Repton, who had only seen Ruth on one occasion—and that when she was carried out half-dead in Cecil's arms from the sand-pit at Gatcombe—began to have a glimmering recollection of her, would not the truth dawn, sooner or later, upon Cecil himself? Fortunately, however, he never levelled glass at her; and apparently satisfied with the general success of the play, paid no particular attention to the heroine after her first appearance. This indifference, and his position at the back of the box, might even, I began to flatter myself, cause him in his turn to remain unrecognised, be-

cause unseen, by Ruth. If she had caught sight of him already, at least, she must have been gifted with great self-control; for her whole intelligence had been apparently absorbed in her part, which, indeed, she played to perfection. The piece, in short, was an unequivocal success; and at its close, after the actors had been summoned before the curtain, there arose from all sides that cry of 'Author! Author!' which makes young ears to tingle and the young heart to beat, as much, perhaps, as any sound from human lips. It was of Nelly that I was thinking then, and of dear Aunt Ben, as, with eyes dew-bright with pleasure, they congratulated me, from their loving hearts, rather than of Cecil or of Ruth; and when, in obedience to this reiterated call, they made way for me to come to the front of the box, in order that I might make my bow, I was unaware that my cousin followed me, doubtless the better to observe the triumph of

his friend. He did not see, nor did I see —though Nelly did—a white hand move the drop-scene aside, and a white face gaze out upon us from the stage, with all the pride and triumph faded out of it, and a wild and puzzled look in their place.

It was a moment in my life which, though I can never forget it, I have never been able to recall, as regards those details which generally imprint themselves on the memory so vividly on supreme occasions. I saw a sea of upturned curious faces; I heard a tumult of applausive voices, mixed with the clapping of hands; I felt that Aunt Ben was patting me on the back; I knew that Nelly was standing behind me somewhere, with the happy tears in her bright eyes; but I was aware of all these things only in a confused and dream-like fashion; and when a hand was placed on my shoulder, and my cousin's voice said, 'You are wanted, Fred, behind the scenes,' it was like waking from a dream.

A servant in scarlet (for the Corintheum affected splendour in its liveries, though its stage 'properties' enjoyed a well-earned reputation for economy and second-handedness) was standing at the door of the box.

'Miss Brabant wishes to see you for a moment, sir.'

'Ah, that's the worst of it!' groaned Aunt Ben. She seemed to imagine that a dramatic triumph must always needs be purchased by a sacrifice of morality.

'Let Cecil go with him, and see that he is a good boy!' cried Lady Repton, laughing.—'Go, Cecil, go!'

I cannot guess (or, at least, I could not at that time) what it was that made my cousin so obedient to Lady Repton; but as he had come to the theatre at her command, so now he at once arose at her suggestion and moved towards the door.

'But he has not been asked,' urged Nelly hastily—the first to recognise that, if this matter was carried out, the next

moment would bring Ruth and Cecil face to face.

'Yes, yes, it was only my little joke,' pleaded Aunt Ben earnestly; 'of course there can be no harm in Fred's going alone.'

'If you love your friend, Mr. Cecil, and have any regard for his good principles, you'll go with him now,' said Lady Repton gravely, though in fits of laughter behind her fan.

'I will certainly go with him,' said Cecil resolutely. He had no longer the appreciation of humour that had once distinguished him, but took everything that was said to him *au pied de lettre.*

'Very good,' said I, not a little displeased with his pertinacity, and irritated by my aunt's folly. 'Since he is so determined to make a fool of himself and me,' thought I, 'let him take the consequences.' So we both followed the man in scarlet.

On the other side of the stage-door, I

met Mr. Magnus the manager; he held out both his 'helping hands' to welcome me.

'This is a proud moment for you, Mr. Wray,' said he. 'I congratulate you heartily. I trust my company has fulfilled your expectations, and rendered your play to your satisfaction?'

'They have quite fulfilled my expectations,' said I dryly, for they had not been very high; 'but Miss Brabant has surpassed them.'

'Ah, yes, she was glorious! I have just been telling her so. You will find her in the green-room.'

She was not there, however, but in her own dressing-closet. Making a sign to Cecil that he should remain behind a little, I knocked at the door, and Ruth opened it with her own hands; she had not changed her stage-attire, and looked very pale, and less like herself than ever.

'You brought your cousin with you to-night,' she began excitedly; 'I wish to—'

'Hush!' said I; 'he is here. He has not recognised you yet. He wishes to be introduced to Miss Brabant.'

'Let it be done,' said she, with a curious sort of defiance in her tone, which I was at a loss to understand; though it was natural enough that she should feel aggrieved with him—that her self-love should be wounded.

She stepped out at once, like a beautiful prince in a fairy tale, and stood with her plumed hat in her hand, while I beckoned to Cecil to come forward.

'This is Miss Brabant,' said I, 'the lady to whose talents I am indebted for the success of my little play.'

He bowed politely, and murmured a few words of commonplace compliment. Cecil had given evidence, in the old days at Gatcombe, of his capacity for acting; but if he was acting now, he would have been a greater than Kean or Kemble. It was perfectly certain that he did not recognise his old love. Wounded to the quick by

this, as she well might be, Ruth yet retained her self-possession.

'Have you never seen me before, upon the boards?' asked she, in her stage-voice, and drooping her eyelids after the stage-siren fashion.

'Never,' said he, 'I am ashamed to say, before to-night. But I have long wished to have the honour of being introduced to a lady of whom I have heard my cousin here speak with such admiration and regard.'

He spoke rapidly, and with an indifferent air—under the circumstances, indeed, almost a rude one—like a man who, paying a compliment at the expense of truth, does not even take the trouble to secure *vraisemblance.*

'But you have not seen Miss Brabant at all,' returned she archly, and with a glance of piqued embarrassment at her male costume; 'you have only seen the Foot-page. Now, if you will accompany your

cousin to-morrow to Laburnum Villa — for I hope to get him there, to make a few verbal alterations in my part — I shall then have great pleasure in receiving you in my own proper character. I lunch at two; will that hour suit your convenience?'

'I am quite at my Cousin Fred's disposal,' observed Cecil coldly.

'And *he* is bound to be at mine,' interposed Miss Brabant hastily, just as I was about to frame an excuse; 'so that point is settled.—I will not detain you now any longer,' continued she, addressing myself, 'because I know what troops of friends are always waiting to congratulate a successful author. I shall see you both to-morrow.'

As she shook Cecil by the hand, she again repeated her invitation. '*You* will not fail me, I trust, even if your cousin does?'

'I will come most certainly,' said he; and this time I thought there was really something like warmth in his tone, though

it might have been only decision. Was it possible that Ruth was about to attain the unparalleled triumph of winning my cousin's heart twice over — once as the simple village maid, and again as the accomplished actress? I felt well-nigh certain, from her behaviour, that that at least was the task which she had set herself to do, and also that she was confident of its accomplishment.

'The Brabant is very beautiful, Cecil,' said I, as we retraced our steps through the labyrinth of narrow ways that led from that Rosamond's Bower of hers into the house. 'Don't you think so?'

'I daresay many persons would do so,' said he carelessly; 'but, to my mind, she is only passably good-looking.'

I felt morally certain that this reply was a hypocritical one, for, indeed, it could not have been natural in any man's mouth; and was more convinced than ever that her beauty had made a strong impression on him.

CHAPTER VI.

'SPEED, HANSOM, SPEED.'

THOUGH I woke next morning to find myself famous as the author of that highly-successful little drama, the *Foot-page*, the remembrance of my promise to take Cecil to Laburnum Villa weighed down my spirits, and filled me with a presentiment of evil. In vain Lady Repton read aloud at breakfast three-quarters of a column of eulogium from the Thunderer itself, Aunt Ben observing, 'Very true, I'm sure,' at every laudatory adjective, and dear Nelly squeezing my hand under the table. As kings and laws are said to mitigate but little human distresses, so does public favour fail to remedy one's private grief. Amid all

the praise and congratulation that poured in upon me that morning, I was sick at heart with the apprehension of the impending meeting between Cecil and Ruth. In the wild excitement of the preceding night, I had attached but slight importance to it, and had even, as I have narrated, been the very one to introduce her to him, though not in her proper person; but now, as I reviewed the matter calmly, I could hardly believe that I had played so rash a part, and, still worse, had undertaken to repeat it. Recognition (as it seemed to me by miracle) had not taken place on the first occasion, so far as Cecil was concerned; but it was quite certain to do so on the second. For some reason or other, which I could not fathom, Ruth was evidently bent upon discovering herself; and I knew the vigour and determination of her character too well by this time to doubt that, even if I refused to aid her, she would find other means to accomplish her purpose.

As regarded Cecil, I positively dreaded, as the result of this interview, no less a calamity than the loss of his reason. His behaviour had been occasionally so very strange and unaccountable, his habits were become so peculiar, and he was altogether so altered from the man he had been, that the balance of his mind seemed to me to be most insecure, and liable to be destroyed by any shock. It may well be asked, if such were my apprehensions, how could I have so easily consented to let him accompany me to the theatre, far less behind the scenes, and into the very presence of Ruth herself. But as to the first, I had no possible excuse for dissuading him, since I had always pressed and urged him to visit such scenes, in order to distract him from his melancholy; and as to the second, I can only reply, what I have already said, that I was half-demented myself by the excitement of my dramatic triumph.

When I now recalled his words and air

in reply to my inquiry, six months ago or so, whether he would like to see Ruth again or not, I fairly trembled. It was just possible, it is true, that the approaching meeting might have the best possible effect upon my poor cousin. Love might once more resume its sway over him, and that with such passion and power as to sweep away all his morbid thoughts like cobwebs; but, on the other hand, the sight of Ruth might re-open the half-healed wound made by the accusation of Batty, and recall all the bitter memories of his more recent past as well. These last, indeed, seemed to be ever present with him, as it was; but while they were so, there was at least no room in his breast for other troubles. If the matter turned out ill, he would, naturally enough, reproach me with my deception; though, after all, that had been forced upon me. I had passed my word to Ruth not to disclose her identity to Cecil; and my cousin, on

his part, had not only expressed but little anxiety on her account, but announced his determination not to see her, even should she be found. Their position in regard to one another was, in fact, inexplicable to me in both cases. While Jane was alive, Ruth had evidently acquiesced with cheerfulness in her separation from Cecil; and it would not, I verily believe, have much distressed her, had she been told that they were never to meet again. When Cecil returned without his sister, however, I felt sure that Ruth had desired her relations with her old love to be renewed; nor was I surprised at it, for reasons that I have already given. But what did astound me was, that, after she had seen him, and found him so unlike his dear old self, so indifferent to their past—for what but indifference could possibly have rendered her unrecognisable to him?—and so consumed with sorrow for one in whose fate she had not only felt no pang, but even a sense of satis-

faction and relief—I say what did astound me was, that *now* she should not only wish to see him, but should have insisted upon it, and even asked him to her own house.

Of one thing I was quite certain—that re-awakened love had nothing to do with it. If I had last night fancied—for I had scarcely been in a condition to use my judgment—that Cecil himself had been struck anew by the charms of Ruth in the person of Miss Brabant, the feeling had certainly not been reciprocal. She had been obviously annoyed and hurt by his conduct towards her; if her heart had been touched, she could never have coquetted with him as she had done. Then why did she want to see him? Perhaps only to take revenge upon him for his forgetfulness of her. And, indeed, at times he did seem to have forgotten her altogether. A curious instance of this had taken place with reference to the letters he had enclosed to me for Ruth, and which (it will be remembered) she had

declined to receive, and bidden me burn— I had not burned them, because it struck me that if Cecil should come back to England, he would, naturally enough, demand from me their return; and when he did come back, and omitted to do so, I took an opportunity of reminding him that I was still in possession of them.

'Letters?' cried he, putting his hand to his forehead. 'Letters that I wrote to Ruth? What letters?'

If he had asked, What Ruth? I could scarcely have been more astonished; but it was a peculiarity of his strange mental condition, and one which most caused us apprehension, that his memory upon all subjects (except those connected with his sister) would suddenly fail him and become a blank. It is no wonder, then, taking all things into consideration, that I felt anxiety about this coming interview, and a very strong personal disinclination to be present at it. It was cowardly, no doubt; but after

all, as I argued with myself, what good could my presence effect? If my cousin and Ruth should wish to throw themselves into one another's arms, my company would be very embarrassing to them; and if, on the other hand, they should upbraid one another, I had no apology to offer for either of them. I well knew what Aunt Ben and Nelly would have advised me to do in the matter, and what they would have done themselves — especially if they had known of Cecil's conduct that dreadful night at the hotel: they would not have deserted him in the coming ordeal. I did not, therefore, consult them in the affair, or tell them a word about it, and tried to persuade myself that it was to spare their feelings. 'Surely,' I now reflect, looking back upon that eventful day from quite another standpoint, 'the old bond of friendship between my cousin and myself must have been much loosened, to have permitted me so to act;' and yet I was positively convinced

that, notwithstanding the sad change in him for the worse, in all other respects — and even in his *manner* towards *me* — his affection for myself was to the full as warm and genuine as ever.

It had been arranged that I was to call for Cecil at his hotel at mid-day, and take him on with me to Laburnum Villa; but I now wrote him word that I would meet him there instead, for which a fortunate excuse offered itself in the departure of Lady Repton, whom it was no more than bare politeness that I should accompany to the railway station; and this I did. She was very sorry to leave us, for (with the exception of my cousin) she had probably found us more genial associates—for my Aunt Ben forgot all her dislike when playing the hostess—than she was wont to meet with at her own stately home, and had parted from Nelly especially with effusion. She was full of her praises, and profuse in her auguries for our future happiness; and in acknowledging

them, I expressed my regret that my poor cousin had not the good-fortune to possess an Eleanor, who might while him from his melancholy mood back to his old self.

'He *did* have a *tendresse*, as you have doubtless heard, years ago at Gatcombe, with that beautiful creature whom he rescued from the sand-cave, Ruth Waller.'

'That's the name, and now I've got it!' cried Lady Repton triumphantly.

'Got what?' said I, affecting to misunderstand her, though I guessed pretty well what was coming.

'Well, upon my word, Master Fred, you *must* be in love. Cupid is blind, one knows, but I always thought his blindness was only in reference to the beloved object. But no—' Here she stopped, and looked exceedingly disconcerted. 'And yet, of course, *that* could not be the case either, or else your cousin would have known her.'

'Known whom?'

'Well, I was just on the point of dis-

covering a mare's-nest. The fact is, as I sat at the play last night, I was haunted by the recollection of some face—I could not remember whose—in connection with Miss Brabant; and when you mentioned Ruth Waller, I seemed all of a sudden to have found the key to it.'

'So you have,' said I, smiling. 'Miss Brabant *is* Ruth Waller; only, you must keep it a dead secret, please, for *all* our sakes.'

'For all your sakes?' repeated Lady Repton gravely. 'I am sorry for this, Fred; I am more sorry than I can say. I am not a strait-laced person, my dear boy—don't lace half tight *enough*, indeed, as some people say—but I don't like such goings-on as these. Young men will be young men, I know; but that's a phrase that is made use of to excuse a deal of villany. Under your aunt's roof, and with Eleanor by your side, you should not, in my opinion, be playing into your cousin's hands in this way. If he

likes the girl, there is no excuse—since he has plenty of money—for his not marrying her. I was an actress once myself, and perhaps that makes me feel strongly upon the point; indeed, I should not like to say to you *what* I feel about it, Master Fred, because we might quarrel; but if that girl goes to the bad, remember, it will be partly your fault. I honestly believe that I should be only doing my duty if I wrote to your Aunt Benita, and told her the whole story —for you may be sure I know it.'

These words were delivered with such amazing volubility and indignation, that I was quite unable to interrupt them; but while she stopped to take breath, I hastened to set her right.

'If you wrote to Aunt Ben to-morrow, my dear Lady Repton, you could tell her no news; both she and Nelly know that Miss Brabant and Ruth are the same person. It is only my cousin who is not aware of it.'

'Cecil not aware? Your cousin Cecil not know it?' Her ladyship looked aghast.

'Last night was the first time, I should have told you, Lady Repton, that my cousin had had the opportunity of seeing Ruth since he left Gatcombe. We had purposely concealed from him the fact of her identity with Miss Brabant; and but for you, he would never have gone to the play at all, or run the chance of meeting her. I was not surprised that he did not recognise her upon the stage; but afterwards, when he insisted upon accompanying me behind the scenes, I confess I thought he could not fail to have done so. Yet I am bound to say that I was myself in her company for a quarter of an hour, when she was less disguised, too, than yesterday, and on that occasion she deceived *me*, though, like yourself, I had a vague recollection that I had seen her, or some one like her, elsewhere.'

'*You?* Yes, that might be,' exclaimed

Lady Repton scornfully. 'But nothing will persuade me that she deceived your cousin. He may have had his reasons for ignoring her, but that he did know her is certain. Depend upon it, he has some design in it—not a very creditable one, perhaps. Do you know, Fred,' added she gravely, while I was turning over this novel view of the subject in my mind, 'I never saw so great a change in any man for the worse as in your cousin Cecil. I don't speak of his mere melancholy, but his whole nature is soured and distorted. He seems to have no affection left for any one, except it be for *yourself*, and he cannot have much of that, since he thought of absenting himself from the first night's performance of your play.'

'Nay, but,' said I thoughtfully, 'in case you are right in your impression that Cecil is not deceived as to Ruth, but only pretends to be, he may have discovered who she was long ago, and declined to attend the performance on that very account. As

there are none so deaf as those who don't wish to hear, he, of course, gave no sign of recognition; but then, again, he would surely have refused, even at your bidding, to go with me, as he did, into her very presence. Besides, he has accepted her invitation to go and see her to-day at her own house.'

'Alone?' asked Lady Repton; 'or in your company?'

'Well, he was to have gone with *me;* but the fact is, I—I—'

'You got out of it,' said her ladyship quietly. 'You thought there might be some unpleasant scene, and therefore made use of my departure as an excuse to avoid it. That is so like a man! Your father, however, would not have done so, Master Fred. What time were they to meet?'

'At one,' said I. 'Cecil is very punctual, and has already seen her, without doubt.'

'I am sorry for it,' observed my companion sententiously.

There was an unmistakable look of alarm in her expressive features.

'Well,' said I, 'they must either quarrel or make it up. It can be nothing very serious, after all.'

'I don't know that, Fred,' said she slowly. 'The only tragedy of real life to which I was ever a witness, took place under some such circumstances as the present. If your cousin has recognised Ruth, he must have some very strong reason for ignoring her; while she, on the contrary, must be bent indeed upon *her* purpose (whatever that may be), to have thus invited him to her own house, after the slight he has put upon her. It will be a terrible interview, you may depend upon it. There will be bitter recriminations and stinging words. Heaven grant there may be no worse!'

'What!' said I; 'do you suppose that Cecil is capable of harming a woman, and especially one that he has once loved, as he

did Ruth, nay, whom, moreover, as I believe, he still loves?'

'If he still loves, he would not avoid her,' returned my companion; 'nor, on the other hand, would he fail to know her. No, no; he loves her not, Fred. But it is not of Cecil that I am afraid, but *for* him. We women, when we are injured, are very dangerous; we have this much of the nature of the serpent that tempted our first mother—when trodden on, we turn and bite.'

'Great Heaven!' cried I. 'Do you mean that, in her passion, she might stab him?'

'I do,' said she quietly; 'and I know some that would forgive her if she did. He is an altered man, even we ourselves admit; but what must he appear to *her*, to whom he paid his vows, and promised to be faithful until death! So changed in two short years, that he repudiates her to her face, as we cut a disagreeable acquaintance

in the street!—Yes, Fred, you are right!' I had pulled the check-string while she was speaking, and stopped the brougham. 'You must see to this at once; and Heaven grant that you may find all well with both of them!'

With a hearty clasp of the hand, I left my companion to pursue her way with her maid (whom she called in from her seat upon the box), and jumped into a hansom cab. How bitterly I reproached myself with my selfishness in not having accompanied my cousin that morning! I felt that Lady Repton's words were weighty in any case; but in this (when the idea of violence was once presented to me), how natural it seemed that a girl like Ruth, impulsive and hot-blooded, though capable, as I knew, of deep and generous feeling, might be hurried into some rash act she might regret her whole life long, but for which she could never make atonement! They must already have been an hour to-

gether, and I was at least half an hour's drive from Laburnum Villa. My driver did his best, and urged his horse (it was a white one, and I well remember how his hairs came out, and covered me like a snow-storm) to his full speed; and yet I seemed to have never been driven so slowly.

CHAPTER VII.

INEXPLICABLE.

WHEN I came in sight of Laburnum Villa, it was a positive relief to me that there were at least no external signs of a catastrophe; that its white walls shone brightly in the sun, unstained by blood; that there was no crowd within its well-ordered little garden, no clamour about its porched door. Everything, indeed, looked much as usual, except that the drawing-room window was closed, which it was Ruth's habit to keep open almost throughout the year, her old Gatcombe habits of outdoor life making fresh air indispensable to her. Perhaps they were sitting in that very room together, reconciled, and only waiting for my friendly voice to congratulate them on

their happiness; perhaps— But I did not dare to picture to myself what my heart foreboded. It struck me that the house was stiller than usual; the cook was not singing at her work below-stairs, as was generally the case; nor was the gaily-dressed little *soubrette*, Fantine, at the lower window, on the look-out for the baker or the policeman. At the thought of the policeman, quite a shudder ran through me, and I rang the bell with a trembling hand. The servant was much longer than usual in replying to my summons; but she came at last, looking pale and disturbed, and without the smile with which she generally favoured me, as a dramatic author patronised by her young mistress.

'Miss Brabant is not at home this morning, sir,' said she, in answer to my inquiry.

'That is impossible,' said I: 'I had an appointment with her for one o'clock.'

'Yes, sir; so she said. But since you

did not come in time, she went out immediately after lunch. She bade me say that she was very sorry to have missed you.'

'Did she go out alone?'

'Yes, sir; no lady has called this morning.'

The manner with which this remark was made was even more worthy of admiration than the sentiment it conveyed: it would have become the mouth of the *concierge* of a nunnery.

'A *gentleman* has called to-day, as I happen to know,' replied I quietly, 'for we were to have come together. Now' (here I slipped five shillings into Fantine's hand), 'is he here still, or has he gone?'

'He has gone, sir — upon my solemn oath,' returned the girl, desirous doubtless of giving a full measure of assurance to so liberal an inquirer.

'But your mistress is in, Fantine, I feel convinced.'

'She *says* she is not, sir,' returned the

girl naively; 'and I suppose she ought to know.' Then she added with sudden gravity: 'The truth is, she *is* in, Mr. Wray; but she cannot see anybody. Something—I don't know what—has terriby upset her. She cannot see even *you*, or attend to business of any sort.'

'But it is not business about which I am come, Fantine; it is something quite different — something connected with the very matter which you say has distressed her; and I hope to do her good.'

'Then come in, sir, in Heaven's name!' said Fantine with a sudden collapse of her bright manner, and bursting into tears. 'My dear mistress is quite beside herself about something or other. It's all, as I believe, on account of that black young gentleman as called this morning, and whom you say you know. How ever my mistress could allow herself to be put out for a party of that kind!—for my part, I should as soon think of breaking my heart for an African

Serenader! But there, so it is; and if you can bring her any comfort, I'm sure you'll be welcome, though she did say: "Not at home, Fantine; not even to Mr. Wray."'

With that compliment, so delicately insinuated, and with a look to match that seemed to say, 'Black or white, there is nobody she loves like you,' the damsel swept away her tears with the back of her plump hand, and ran up-stairs. She was a long time absent, during which I heard whispered talk in the drawing-room above; but at last she returned with a sealed envelope addressed to myself. I broke it open, and read these words: 'You had better not see me, Mr. Fred, *much* better not, I think. If, however, after that expression of my opinion, you still deem it right to press your request, come up.' This note did not give me a moment's hesitation. I could easily imagine that the interview would be a painful one to both of us; but I was resolved not to shirk my duty a second time. I

motioned to Fantine to lead the way upstairs.

'She is so altered that you will scarcely know her,' whispered the soubrette sorrowfully. 'She has already sent to the theatre to excuse herself from acting to-night.'

Fantine had not exaggerated the change in her mistress's appearance, as she held out her hand to greet me, without moving from the sofa on which she lay. Her eyes were red with weeping; and over her face, streaked with the traces of tears, her hair fell in tangled masses. When she had worn those false black tresses, she had not looked so little like herself as she did now with her own.

'I am very sorry, Rue,' said I, 'to see you thus. I was not without hope that, in place of this misery, I should have found all well.'

She shook her head, with such a sick despairing smile as was far worse than tears.

'Come, Ruth,' said I, taking her hand,

which was quite cold, in mine; 'I cannot but think that you take too gloomy a view of matters. I wish I had been here when Cecil came.'

'You? No, no; I am glad you were not,' returned she with a sort of shudder. 'I am sorry you came now—so soon; I am not equal to it.'

'I am sorry too, dear Ruth,' said I, 'if that be so. I should not have come, after the note you sent me down, but that I thought so old a friend as I—a common friend to both—might be of use to heal a breach, or—'

'There is no breach,' interrupted she impatiently. 'I cannot tell you what has happened; but it is nothing that you can guess.'

'Dear Ruth,' said I, 'forgive me if I seem officious or importunate; but I owe it not only to yourself, but to poor Cecil, to do my utmost in this matter. I feel that I myself have been to blame—'

'No, no,' she interposed again in a fretful tone; 'you are not to blame. You have done no harm. You can do no good.'

'Nevertheless,' continued I, 'at the risk of your displeasure, Ruth, which I should be very sorry to incur, I must say a few words. I am the only friend that my cousin has now left to him, and bound to speak on his behalf. I feel sure that whatever he has said to-day, or however strange his previous conduct may have seemed to you, he loves you in his heart. I know his nature well, and though it has doubtless suffered from the shock of his sister's death, he will be himself again one day—the same true, faithful, earnest-hearted man he was. He is still loyal to you. I have seen him among others of your sex, not so beautiful as yourself indeed, but fair and young, who, aware of his great wealth, have shown their willingness to share it with him—to become his wife; and they might as well have smiled upon a marble statue.'

'I can believe it,' said Ruth quietly.

'It *is* so, on my soul!' continued I. 'He loves no other woman in the world but you, nor will he ever love one.'

She did not contradict me, but only closed her eyes, as though to shut out my appealing looks, and sighed.

'There are two things alone, Ruth, that bar him from making you his own: the one, that cloud of mystery which still hangs over the fate of your poor brother; the other, a morbid feeling in connection with his sister Jane, whose opposition to your marriage he seems strangely enough to respect in death more than he did in life As to the first, I must confess that it appears to me unlikely that the secret, if there be one, will now be ever revealed. Nay, Cecil himself is of that opinion, for he told me so.'

'And so am I,' said Ruth.

Her tone was so gravely confident — which on this point it had never been be-

fore—that I turned amazed towards her; but she had put her handkerchief to her eyes, doubtless to dry the tears which my reference to her brother's death had caused to flow afresh, and its folds concealed her features.

'And yet,' urged I, 'he has never referred to the matter since his return to England, except upon that one occasion, whereas of old he used to talk and write of nothing else. From this I gather hope that time is weakening the hold of that event upon his mind.'

I paused, but Ruth did not reply.

'You do not deny this, Ruth. You think with me that he is getting over it?'

'It may be so,' said she, still keeping her face concealed. 'But that would make no difference.' She did not speak with the despairing calm that seemed to fit such a reply, but with quiet coldness, as though she were only stating a matter of fact.

'But if it *is* so,' urged I, 'then one of

these two obstacles is being removed, however slowly; and is it to be supposed that this much more morbid and unnatural feeling with respect to Jane will endure when *that* is gone, or so strongly as to condemn him to loveless solitude?'

She was gazing at me now with a strange weird look, quite new to her fair face, so long as I had known it; and with a strange harsh voice she made reply: 'Have you said your say? have you quite done? I have listened very patiently, though your words were torture. It would be no use, I told you; and it *is* no use. Pray, leave me, Master Fred.' The touch of tenderness implied in the use of my old name gave me still a gleam of hope.

'Dear Rue,' said I, 'by the memory of those old days in which he wooed you first, I beseech you, do not steel your heart against my unhappy cousin. However you may wrap yourself in scorn and coldness, I am well convinced that he is dear to you

as you to him. Come, once for all, do you not love poor Cecil?'

She burst into a flood of passionate tears, then turned upon me with angry vehemence. 'You are cruel and unkind,' sobbed she, 'and I will hear no more. It is too much, too hard! I cannot bear it! What is it that you want to hear, sir? Are you anxious to watch every pang — like some hard-hearted doctor, who dissects a miserable creature while it is still alive— in order that you may set them down in writing, for your plays? I have told you, or if I have not done so, I tell you now, that all is over between your cousin and myself!—that we shall never meet again this side the grave!'

I rose, alarmed as well as shocked. She spoke like one possessed, so that her tidings, grievous as they were, were made thrice as positive and hopeless by the tone and air with which they were conveyed.

'This is bad news indeed, Ruth,' said I.

'I did not understand that matters had gone so far and so ill, or I would not have pained you by a fruitless interference. Cecil, at least, shall be saved, at your expense, from similar distress — unless, indeed, you should wish me to urge anything from you.'

'There is nothing to urge, nothing to say,' said she, now quietly enough, and indeed she seemed quite spent and weary; 'all is settled for the best, however bad; and besides, you will not see him more.'

'*I* not see him? You surely must be dreaming, Ruth.'

'If so, it is a ghastly dream,' was her reply. 'No, you will never see your cousin more; but he will write to you. Whatever his letter may ask you to do — however strange his request may seem — accede to it; and ask no more questions, at least of me.'

With these last words upon her lips, she fell back on the cushion—on which she had been supporting herself upon her elbow

—exhausted and half-fainting. I ran to the door and summoned Fantine, who, seeing her mistress's condition, cast upon me a reproachful glance.

'A gentleman should know when he is not wanted,' said she indignantly. 'I told you how it would be. Perhaps you can let *yourself* out at the hall-door.' A hint which, too remorseful to be chapfallen, I hastened to obey.

CHAPTER VIII.

CECIL'S FAREWELL.

It might be thought that, after so strange an interview, in which nothing was cleared up as respected my unhappy cousin, and yet everything placed on a new footing, I should have repaired to his hotel at once. But the fact was, that I was fairly panic-stricken by Ruth's last words, which had a dread significance for me, of which she did not dream. That neither she nor I was to see Cecil more, though I was to receive a communication from him by letter, could surely mean nothing else but that Good-bye which he had already meditated, and been on the very point of saying months ago, namely, his Farewell to Life itself. The letter had been written *then*, and, for

all I knew, had not been destroyed; in that case, he would only have to leave it out upon his desk, as before, and complete the act which I had only delayed. If my apprehension was well grounded, my cousin was no longer among the living; and if he was dead, 'Let my eyes,' thought I with a shudder, 'be not the first to look upon him!' The excitement of the last few days must be my excuse for this moral cowardice. I felt completely unhinged; weary, and yet full of thoughts that denied me a moment's rest.

Utterly without confidence in myself, I drove rapidly home, determined to make Aunt Ben the judge of what was proper to be done, and deeply regretting that I had not taken refuge in her commonsense before; but on reaching home I found both my aunt and Nelly had gone out for a long day's shopping—in connection with the dear girl's *trousseau*, as I now remembered—and would only return in time for dinner.

To apply my mind to writing or reading—far less to sit down unoccupied, and let my fancy take its wild weird way—was not to be thought of; moreover, I did not wish to be alone in the house when that letter should arrive, which, in all probability, was already on its way. I started, therefore, to walk, I cared not whither, so long as it was in the crowded streets, with all the noise and stir of life about me, to distract my thoughts. In this, however, they so little succeeded, that within the first five minutes I found myself opposite Cecil's hotel, and looking up at the window of his bedroom, and lo, it was as red as blood! It is a shameful confession to make, but for an instant I shuddered with horror; nor even when I reflected that the sinking sun was flaming against the pane, did I escape from the ideas to which the fright had given birth. To what ghastly sight, in yonder chamber, thought I, might not those rays be a witness!

Had I not seen him once with my own eyes, a staring dreadful figure, with neck half bare, and the shining weapon in his hand, about to cut the knot of the mystery of life? and now, perhaps, he had done it, and the heart that had once beat in such unison with my own, was stifled for ever, and the gracious lips for ever dumb! What would I not have given to see him come to the window, or even to see another there, though it were but the unconcerned face of the inn servant! All seemed so lonely and desolate up there, and yet I did not dare to invade its solitude. I went home again with feverish haste, to ask if any letter had come for me; and finding none, then out again, this time for a long walk at speed, in the opposite direction. But I could not escape from the spectre I had raised in my own mind. In a by-street in Pimlico, a street-hawker froze my blood by crying: '*Mysterious murder in a West-end 'otel — mysterious*

murder!'—for might not Cecil's suicide be thought to be a murder, or the man have called it so, to make his broad-sheet the more saleable? It was, of course, impossible that the catastrophe I dreaded to hear of could, even if it had happened, be by this time in print; and yet I felt relieved when the fellow went on to roar out: '*All for love*—his sweetheart having perished by *drowning* in the river Lea.' As I passed the Corintheum, there was a grumbling crowd about its pit-door. 'If I'd a-known she didn't hact to-night,' said one, 'I'd never have come;' and 'What's the play without *'er* in it?' growled another. The uncomplimentary comment upon my drama did not wound me; but the mention of Miss Brabant's absence recalled to me its cause with renewed alarms. How thankful was I, when I got home, to hear from the servant that 'the ladies had returned,' for a letter was lying on the hall-table for me in Cecil's hand-

writing, and, if I had been alone, I felt that I should have lacked courage to open it. I took it up with a trembling hand, and carried it with me into the drawing-room, under pretence of getting more light to read it by; and even then I was glad to defer doing so, and affected to listen with interest to Aunt Ben's triumphant account of her good bargains.

'We have been very economical, but also highly successful—have we not, Nelly?' said she.

And Nelly corroborated her with becoming enthusiasm. Not till we had dined —for what was the use of spoiling *their* dinner, though, for my own part, I only made-believe to eat, and could scarcely swallow a mouthful—did I produce the letter; and after premising shortly what had happened at Laburnum Villa, proceed to read it.

'By the time you receive these lines,

dear Fred,' it began, 'I shall have left London, never to return to it, nor to see any of you in this life again.'

Here I stopped, breathless, not with surprise, but with that sharp sense of relief that is akin to pain, and deeply thankful that matters were no worse.

My aunt, on the other hand, seemed turned into stone with astonishment. 'Good Heavens!' ejaculated she, 'what is the poor lad after now? He must have taken leave of his senses altogether.'

'How very, very sad this is!' said Nelly; the tears rose in her bright eyes; she was pitifully contrasting, as I guessed, her own exceeding happiness, with the wretchedness and desolation that poor Cecil's words bespoke.

'This is not a resolution of the moment, beloved cousin,' the letter went on to say, 'but one that I have had in my mind for long. I am unfit to be with you in my

present state; whenever I enter your pleasant home circle, it is to damp its mirth, and chill its sunshine: and yet it is not for your sake that I withdraw myself from it—irrevocably, inexorably—but for my own. To say that I shall be happier alone than in your company, would be a mockery, for I never am, nor can be happy; but I feel that it is better for me to be alone. You must be content with that excuse for my conduct, for I have no other. You may imagine that my motive for thus estranging myself lies, somewhere, in the interview which I have this day had with Ruth; but that is not so. I should have bidden you "good-bye" a little later, perhaps; but it would have come to pass all the same. I do not reproach you for not having told me about Ruth; she has taken all blame, if there be blame, on herself, and doubtless with justice, though the shock to which I have been subjected was, as you will understand, most terrible. If my last

wishes are dear to you, you will forbear to interrogate Ruth upon this matter: her lips are sealed, except so far as to corroborate, if it be necessary, the fact that I have left my native land for ever. It is useless to search for me; and to know that you were doing so, would only be to add another grief to the heavy burden that I must carry to my grave. Enough of that sad subject—my wretched self. Let me now speak of your own affairs. The one bright gleam in my dark life, since I returned to England, has been, my beloved cousin, the success which has dawned at last upon your dramatic future: that it may grow and grow, and your fame with it, is my most earnest wish. If I could hope that it would do so in proportion to your deserts, there would be no necessity for what I am about to add; but though merit so often gains the reward it deserves upon the stage, the playwright himself does not always reap it.'

'That is not like Cecil,' observed Nelly thoughtfully.

'That is true,' said I, reperusing aloud the laboured passage; 'but, then, we must remember that Cecil is not like himself.'

'No, indeed,' said my aunt, sighing. 'To think that he should have ever taken such delight in law and lawyers! I believe that Mr. Clote did him a deal of harm by making him think so much of his money: depend upon it, that will now become the poor lad's hobby-horse; he will care for nothing else, and die a miser.'

'Hush!' said I softly. 'Do not judge him harshly. Here is something, Aunt Ben, which, at least, will clear him of *that* charge.' And I read out as follows:

'Dramatic success, however great, will at all events never bring you a fortune, and without, at least, good means, I am sure, dear Fred, you are not the man who ought to marry. I have distressed you

once by speaking on this subject, but you must not misunderstand me now, as you did then; I had never any end in view beside your happiness, and — since your happiness is bound in hers—that of your Eleanor.'

'Now, that again is very unlike Cecil,' remarked my aunt: 'there is not a word of kindliness for Nelly herself.'

'Nay, but *this* is like him,' said I—'just like his old Gatcombe self. Listen!'

'In order, therefore, to insure for you material prosperity, I have arranged certain matters with Mr. Clote, with which I earnestly entreat your compliance. There was a time when there would have been no sense of obligation in either of us at receiving a favour at the other's hand: recall it now, dear Fred, and feel none in receiving one at mine. What use have I for money? Even if it could buy me friends, it would

be of no service, since I wish to live alone. I have reserved to myself what is amply sufficient for my needs. With the rest, if you oblige me by accepting it, I shall have purchased happiness—the happiness of making another happy, who is still dearer to me, Fred (you may always be sure of that), than my own life. Mr. Clote will call, and communicate to you the particulars. Do not, I beseech you, refuse the only proof of friendship—though it may seem a gross one—that it is now in my power to show you. The same reason, or unreason, if you choose to call it so, that exiles me from you and England, makes me also averse to carry on any correspondence; your letters would only bring once more before my eyes long-banished joys, and wake again regretful memories. If you have, however, serious occasion to write to me, Ruth will always be in possession of my address. — Adieu, dear Fred, adieu for ever! May all happiness

attend you, is the constant prayer of your affectionate CECIL.'

For a full minute after I had finished this epistle none of us spoke, so busy were we all with our own surmises or suspicions.

'The poor dear fellow is mad,' sighed I at last.

'If his head is amiss,' observed Aunt Ben thoughtfully, 'he shows, at least, that his heart is sound. I wonder what sort of arrangement he has made with Mr. Clote in your favour?—A very handsome one, I'll be bound.'

'My dear aunt,' said I gravely, 'I trust you do not think me capable of taking advantage of it in any case?'

'And why on earth should you not, Fred? Your poor cousin has obviously no use for all his money, while even a small slice of it would be of the greatest benefit to you and Eleanor. For my part, I think it does Cecil immense credit to have thought

of making you such an offer at a time like this, instead of waiting, as most folks would be content to do, for the opportunity of presenting a silver fork and spoon. It is when a young couple are without experience in cutting and contriving, and just setting up for themselves, that they stand most in need of such help—not when they have settled down, and learned how to cut their coat according to their cloth. I think it a great proof of commonsense in Cecil.'

'And yet, my dear aunt,' urged I, unable to repress a smile at the queer logic which her love for her nephew and prospective niece had suggested to Aunt Ben, 'you have just admitted that Cousin Cecil's wrong in his head.'

'Well, well,' returned the old lady impatiently, 'he can't help *that.* We ought to be thankful that his madness has not driven him in the other direction, the same that was taken by old—' I knew she was within a hairsbreadth of saying 'old skin-

flint,' for she turned the same colour as her cap-strings, which were purple, as she corrected herself with: 'Taken by poor old Mr. Bourne, you know—our dear Eleanor's grandfather. And this I will say, that, if you don't take the money, you are ten times madder than your cousin Cecil is or ever will be. Why, I suppose if he had given you a handsome marriage present, you would not have been too proud to accept that; and what is this but a marriage present, made a few weeks in advance?'

'That would be a very different matter, Aunt Ben,' said I; 'for, if I don't mistake, this letter of Cecil's conveys an offer of such a sum of money as it is quite out of the question that I should accept. However, I have no doubt that we shall see Mr. Clote to-morrow, and he will tell us all about it.'

'He won't accept it, my dear,' observed Aunt Ben to Eleanor, in a very loud 'aside.' 'I know poor dear Fred so well. He is just like his father before him—quite mad about

money matters. The Wrays all pique themselves upon not thinking much of money; upon not bowing down to the golden calf, as other people do; and yet they must think there is something very sacred about the animal too, or they would not make such a fuss about accepting a loin or a shoulder, as a present from a friend.'

'And yet you are a Wray yourself, Aunt Ben,' returned Eleanor, smiling; 'and, if I am not much mistaken, would be quite as unwilling as Fred, if you were placed in his position—'

'Stuff and nonsense!' interrupted the old lady angrily. 'I thought you were a more reasonable person. If your poor old grandfather could hear you taking up with such opinions, it would make him turn in his grave. You pretend to think with that foolish boy, just to please him; and if you do that now, when you are your own mistress — mark my words — when you are married to him you will be his slave!'

While this sharp admonition was in progress, there had come a ring at the front-door bell; and at this moment our hand-maiden entered with an address-card. 'This gentleman wishes to see you, sir, upon important business.' On the card was printed 'Mr. Clote, Gray's Inn.'

CHAPTER IX.

ELEANOR'S SCISSORS.

I HAD seen Mr. Clote years ago at Gatcombe, where he had come upon business immediately after the arrival of my cousins from India, and he now looked pretty much the same as he had done then: a small, spare man, with a skin like parchment, and not a trace of hair upon it, he seemed to bid defiance to Time. We had got on very well together of old, though we had nothing in common; he was very frank, and had had the courage to confess his antipathy to a country life, his contempt for horses, and his disbelief in exercise and fresh air. They had never done him any good, he said (though I doubt if he had given them a fair

chance), and he was always well in his chambers at Gray's-inn. As he was there for seven hours every week-day, for about fifty weeks in the year, it must be allowed that he had very good health—a fact which he mainly attributed to 'never putting anything that was not warm into his stomach.' But I don't think he enjoyed it. He enjoyed nothing, by his own confession (which I have no reason to disbelieve), except attending to business, and letting-off little jokes, generally at his own expense. Literature, he was wont to say, was a dead letter to him. 'Deeds, not Words,' was his motto. With this facetious account of his opinions he was greatly pleased, and repeated it often: doubtless his clerks always laughed at it, and it was considered in their salaries; for he was a kindly and open-handed little fellow; though, to look at him, you could have scarcely called him flesh and blood.

'Glad to see you, Mr. Fred—glad to

see the ladies: they need not leave us;' for both my aunt and Nelly were pruning their wings for flight to the drawing-room at the sight of Mr. Clote, who had a reputation for contemning the fair sex as well as exercise and fresh air. 'My business is not of a private nature; indeed, it is not business at all, in a high sense, being an affair of sentiment. The ladies will doubtless understand it; I confess *I* don't. However, I have excellent news for you, Mr. Fred; though, perhaps, it is no news after all.' (His quick eye had fallen on my cousin's letter.) 'Mr. Cecil has written, has he?'

'He has written,' said I, 'to offer me, as I understand, some portion of his property.'

'Some portion!' echoed the little lawyer. 'When you give your aunt a slice of plum-pudding, you don't call the pudding some portion, do you, but the slice? Well, Cecil has given away his pudding—thirty thousand pounds or so—and kept the slice—

some five thousand pounds, little more than his sister's share—for himself.'

'Thirty thousand pounds!' cried I; 'that is incredible.'

'Mr. Fred, here's the deed of gift.'

And Mr. Clote produced a parchment covered with cabalistic signs and seals.

'Well, and what do you think of it all, Mr. Clote?'

'Think of it? Why, that you are a deuced lucky fellow!'

'Yes. But what do you think of Cecil? He gave you his instructions personally, as I conclude. Do you not think him, to say the least of it, very eccentric?'

'Of course; but not more so than a man who lives in the open air and gives himself up to exercise is liable to become. At Gatcombe, he was always flying through space upon a leaping-pole, like a witch on a broomstick; in South America, he rode wild horses, as I understand; in Switzerland, he climbed the mountains before sunrise: this

is what comes of it all. But he is perfectly sane in the eye of the law, if you mean *that.* Moreover'—I am sure this was in reply to some expression of opinion conveyed by my aunt's face, though I did not catch it—'the money would be sure to come to you or yours sooner or later, if your cousin does not marry, as he protests he never will. He is a very sensible young fellow so far—begging your pardon, Miss Bourne. I meant, that since there are certainly not two Miss Bournes in the world, he was a sensible young fellow. O, there's not the slightest reason why you should not take the money.'

'You must permit me to be the judge of that, Mr. Clote,' said I coldly.

'I think there is one other person who ought to be consulted, Fred,' observed my aunt with significance. 'You should remember, dear, that your future wife would have been an heiress—I don't say but for your fault, yet certainly but for *you.* It

should surely be a question, whether you should deprive her a second time, from a morbid sense of independence, of competence and position.'

'It is a question,' said I, 'which she shall answer for herself.—This deed, as I understand, Mr. Clote, puts me in possession of the sum you have mentioned?'

'Just so,' said he: 'you can read it for yourself.'

I took the parchment and placed it in Nelly's hand. 'If you think it right to keep it,' said I, 'we will do so, dear Nelly; you are quite free to choose.'

'Good Heavens!' cried the little lawyer, jumping out of his chair; 'if it had been *ad valorem*, there would have been a matter of a hundred pounds gone, in stamps alone!'

For Eleanor had snatched up her scissors and cut the precious document right across!

I had already cause to know that she was possessed of spirit and independence,

but I had never admired my darling more than at the moment when I saw her with half that parchment in each of her hands.

'She has been accustomed to be a great deal in the open air herself,' observed my aunt quietly, in answer to Mr. Clote's look of astonishment and alarm; and it was the only occasion on which I ever knew Aunt Ben to indulge in a touch of satire.

'It does not matter to *me*, of course,' said the lawyer ruefully; 'but you understand that all Mr. Cecil has done is now labour in vain.'

'We quite understand that,' said I; 'and also that it was a labour of love. Pray, tell him that we thank him with all our hearts. He has forbidden me to write to him, but I must send him a few lines upon such a matter as this.'

I was by this time in the hall with Mr. Clote, who, I fancied, was not sorry to escape from the company of a young lady of such a very resolute character as Eleanor

had proved herself to be. In this, however, I did him wrong.

'My dear sir,' said he confidentially, 'I couldn't tell you so before the ladies, but the fact is, I can tell Mr. Cecil nothing, for the simple reason that I don't know where he is. If I wish to have any communication with him in future, it is to be carried on through an opera-dancer. Yes, sir. Did you ever hear of such an unprofessional proceeding in your life?'

'An opera-dancer?' said I. 'Do you mean Miss Brabant the actress?'

'Well, I believe that is the young lady's name. There is not much difference (as I have been given to understand) between actresses and opera-dancers. She lives at Laburnum something, in St. John's Wood. Upon my life, sir'—and here he mopped his forehead—'I feel as if I was being struck off the rolls.'

I was not so shocked as Mr. Clote, but I was almost equally surprised; for singular

as it was that, after what had passed between them (which was surely something of no pleasant kind), Cecil should have appointed Ruth to be the medium of correspondence between myself and him, it was yet more strange that he should have done the same in the case of his lawyer.

A new key to the mystery of Cecil's conduct now presented itself to my mind. Perhaps Mr. Clote was right in his conclusion, though he had arrived at it so easily. It was possible that my cousin was keeping his resolution with respect to Ruth in the letter, but not in the spirit. He would not marry her, but he had found it impossible to live without her. A proposal of that kind might easily have produced the indignation and chagrin which I had beheld in Ruth, but she might have accepted it, nevertheless. It was by no means out of character with Cecil's old self that he should make atonement for such a course of conduct in the quixotic offer that he had

made to myself. It would be impossible, under such circumstances, that he could continue to visit us, and hence his letter of final farewell.

On the other hand, there was Ruth's solemn statement, that they two were never to meet again, which certainly at the time had impressed me with its truth. Moreover, I had my doubts whether my cousin, with five thousand pounds, would have been welcome to the brilliant Miss Brabant, however acceptable he might have been with seven times that sum. And again, she must have been fully aware of his intention of making over his fortune, and have approved of it, since she had told me to expect a letter from him, with a request, to which, 'however strange,' she had besought me to accede.

Bewildered with these conflicting views, I determined, as far as possible, to resolve the question for myself; and, late as it was, I took a cab, and drove to Cecil's hotel.

'Mr. Wray had departed, with all his luggage, at two o'clock that day,' was the reply to my inquiries; 'and had left no address.'

I then drove to Laburnum Villa. The house was dark, but for a single candle in an upper window. I rang the bell—first softly, then loudly, then with a peal fit to wake the dead. The little household, as I knew, kept very late hours; and I felt confident that the neglect of my summons was intentional. If it was, I should have had no right to complain; for, after all, I was not 'my cousin's keeper.' But I did not think of propriety until I heard Fantine's step descending the stairs. Then I trembled a little, remembering the sharpness of her tongue; and, taking out half a sovereign, held it between my finger and thumb for a sop to Cerberus. It was not, however, Fantine at all, but a blear-eyed old woman, such as that comely damsel might have become some fifty years hence.

'Is Miss Brabant at home?' said I, taken greatly aback by this spectacle.

'No, she ain't,' said the old lady, with a defiant air. 'It's a pretty time for calling, this is; bringing honest people out of their beds. What do ye mean by it?'

I felt so terribly in the wrong, that I hastened to offer this good woman the coin which I had intended for Fantine.

'It's a farthing,' said she sharply; then, having tested the gold between her toothless gums, she added, 'No, it ain't,' and scrutinised me admiringly by the light of the candle.

'I want to know how Miss Brabant is: she was very unwell this morning.'

'She's as right as right,' replied the old lady cheerfully: 'gone into the country for a little change—that's all.'

'Alone?' inquired I as carelessly as I could.

'Yes, yes,' answered the ancient dame

assuringly. 'Besides, a handsome young gentleman like you ought to have no call to be jealous.'

The leer with which she favoured me was full of significance. I daresay, from Fantine's eyes, it would have been that 'roguish glance,' which is asserted to be so attractive; and indeed there was roguery still in this, and plenty of it.

'Any name?' said she.

I hesitated in doubt whether to leave my name or not.

'No,' said I, 'never mind;' and I turned upon my heel. 'Good-night.'

'He's tight,' muttered the old woman like an echo. 'He's forgot his own name;' and I think she was surprised to see me make such a straight course to the cab.

My expedition had been barren in results; but there was something in this last interview with that old hag which seemed to give me the conviction that I should henceforth be a stranger, not only to Cecil,

but to Miss Brabant. It was my belief that they had gone off together.

I had never repented for a single moment of Nelly's act of decision with regard to the deed of gift; but I now approved of it more than ever. To accept money, even from a friend's hand, was, as Aunt Ben had said, distasteful to me, as it had been to all my race; but what would have weighed still more with me in rejecting Cecil's offer (even if it had been less unreasonably large) was the fact, that it had been made, as it seemed to me, with a studious avoidance of Nelly's name—nay with a sort of repudiation of her. Not a wish had been expressed for *her* happiness; not a single message of good-will towards her was to be found throughout that letter of farewell; and though the same might be said with respect to Aunt Ben, I felt the neglect of my darling, of course, more keenly, and resented it with an indignation that my cousin's generosity towards myself inflamed

rather than assuaged. And *now*, so far from accepting a fortune at Cecil's hands, I should have hesitated not a little at receiving a marriage present.

CHAPTER X.

ON OUR HONEYMOON.

WEEKS went on, and my feelings with regard to Cecil's conduct grew less intense, and likewise my curiosity to know its cause. It remained as great a mystery as ever; but I was content to let time resolve it. Miss Brabant had returned to the Corintheum, and was playing my *Foot-page* to still crowded houses. She evinced no desire to see me, and the drama remained as it was, without those finishing touches of which she had informed me it stood in need; but perhaps that had only been an excuse to compel me to bring Cecil to Laburnum Villa. He had not replied to the letter I had written declining his splendid gift, and I did my best to prevent my mind from dwelling on a subject that to me was as

painful as it was perplexing. In this, circumstances assisted me. The success of my play had reversed the relations between myself and the managers. I found that they were not now so ceaselessly occupied but that they could acknowledge the receipt of a letter, and even write half-a-dozen for every one of mine. They vied with one another to secure my dramatic services, and I had quite as much work on my hands in that way as I could conscientiously perform. To do them justice, they did not exact from others a virtue to which they themselves were utter strangers, and thought the conscientiousness quite superfluous. What they desired was, not a good play, but *any* play by one who had already achieved popularity. I got three hundred pounds down—and the *down* is a very difficult thing to pluck out of a manager—for the *Pedlar's Pack;* which, therefore, realised, with the addition of what I had received for six nights' repre-

sentation from the manager of the Hole-in-Wall, a grand total of 301*l.* 10*s.* I found Mr. Magnus politeness, and Mr. Coryton punctuality itself; and both of them to be very agreeable scoundrels.

But besides having my hands full of professional engagements, a subject for still greater congratulation claimed my attention. The happy day of my marriage with Eleanor, so long delayed, was now drawing very near, and I could think of little else. If ever wedded happiness could be counted upon, it surely could be so in my case; for though we were both so young, I had known my darling all her life, and loved her throughout it — first as brother, and then as lover. I had long come to the end of her faults, but every day I seemed to find in her some new flower of virtue. There were few preparations to make, for we were to occupy the same house as man and wife as that in which we already resided; the only difference being, that Nelly

was now to be its mistress in place of Aunt Ben, though, of course, she was to live with us still. I wrote to Cecil to inform him of the date of the ceremony, and besought him to be present at it; for my own fervent happiness had melted my heart towards him. But he neither wrote nor came. This grieved us all, but more upon his own account than ours. We could not restrain our thoughts, though even to one another we never whispered: 'He is ashamed to come.' He sent no marriage present; but, greatly to my embarrassment, a very beautiful one arrived from Miss Brabant.

'Of course you will send it back to her,' said my aunt, looking very seriously at me over her spectacles. 'I call it the height of impudence, and most infamously bad taste on the part of your cousin!'

'My dear aunt,' said I, 'we know nothing certain to Ruth's discredit; and if we should chance to be doing her wrong by our suspicions, I should never forgive my-

self for putting such an insult upon her as you suggest. She has been exceedingly kind to me—'

'No doubt,' interrupted my aunt dryly. 'I can only say that if I were Eleanor'—And she cast a glance at that unfortunate young woman, which seemed to say: 'Arise, white slave, or be for ever fallen! Assert yourself *now*, or be a spiritless and subjugated woman all your life.'

'Permit me to finish my sentence, my dear aunt,' said I; and it was the only occasion that I remember using sharpness to that excellent creature. 'It is to Miss Brabant solely, I was about to remark, that I owe my present success, and all the brightness of my professional future. Whatever injurious thoughts you may entertain about her, I must beg that you do not give them utterance, at all events in my presence. If appearances seem against her, that is no reason why I, of all men, should take her misconduct for granted. While it

remains in doubt, you should give her, in bare justice, the benefit of that doubt—at all events, *I* shall give it her. If the gift had been sent to Eleanor' (and that it had not been so, and also that no letter accompanied it, were certainly circumstances that seemed to justify my aunt's suspicions), 'I should have insisted upon her acknowledging it, though I think she would have had the good taste and charity to do so of her own free will. As it has been sent to both of us, however, it is not necessary for her to write her own thanks, but I will convey them for her.'

Nothing more was then said about the matter; but before the post went out that evening, Nelly slipped into my hands a little folded note.

'Don't tell dear Aunt Ben,' she whispered; 'but send that to Ruth with yours.'

From that moment I felt more assured than ever that I was going to marry a sensible woman.

The wedding took place early in June; and leaving Aunt Ben in solitary state in Merton-square, we went to Switzerland for our honeymoon. This choice of locality was, as I believe, by no means influenced at the time by any association with Cecil. It is not likely that the recollection of the catastrophe to which he had been witness among those Alpine solitudes, should on such an occasion have attracted us towards them; yet no sooner did we find ourselves within the shadow of the snow-crowned hills, than it began to occupy my thoughts to an extraordinary degree. I do not wish to exaggerate the fact, but it is certain that, while she was alive, my poor cousin Jane had never excited half the interest in me that the remembrance of her awful fate awoke in the region of its occurrence. After all, and though I had been less kind to her than I could have wished to have been (or perhaps the reflection arose *because* of it), I was still her kin; and it was a grievous

thought, and one that intruded on me like a nightmare, that somewhere in those wastes of snow and ice my own flesh and blood was lying, unburied, yet incorruptible. Of course I took good care to say no word of this to my bride; but the idea had taken such possession of my own imagination, that it began to affect my spirits, and I had already resolved to pass over into Italy, in order, as I hoped, to get rid of so morbid a sensation, when a circumstance took place which caused it to recur to me with greater force than ever.

We were just sitting down to breakfast one morning in the common room of the hotel at Brieg, when (of all men to meet in such a region) who should walk in but Mr. Clote, attorney and gentleman-at-law!

Even on one's honeymoon, one is glad to meet an acquaintance when one is far from home, and we both welcomed the old gentleman heartily enough.

'Have you been tearing up any more

valuable law documents lately, my dear madam?' inquired he of my wife; and Nelly retorted by asking him whether his mind had yet given signs of decadence from exposure to the fresh air of the mountains, and the exercise that Swiss travelling must needs have entailed upon him.

'Well, yes, my dear young lady,' replied he frankly, 'it *is* softening under the circumstances you have mentioned, combined with female influence; for the fact is, I am travelling about with a young lady. —No, sir,' said he, turning round upon me sharply, as I lifted my eyebrows, 'she is not my wife, as you imagine; I daresay you wish she were. We all know the fable of the fox that had lost his tail, and how you bridegrooms affect to hug your gilded chains; but the fact is, she's my niece, Minna—a most terrible plague to me, but the only possession that my poor brother Tom had to leave behind him, and I was his residuary legatee. She keeps house for

me—very well, I'm bound to say, and let's me do just as I like.'

'Then how was it she made you come to Switzerland, Mr. Clote?' asked my wife mischievously.

'A client of mine fell ill at Geneva, and sent for me to what he thought was his death-bed. Over-walked himself, I daresay, and lost his sleep through getting up to see the sun rise, as though the sun-*set* was not equally satisfactory. Well, I had to come, and as I could hardly leave Minna at home alone, I brought her with me. She loves climbing like a boy; but otherwise there is not much fault to be found with her.—But here is Minna. Look at her boots!'

Miss Clote was a bright little blonde, with blue eyes twinkling with fun, and the wholesomest appearance generally; in her hand was an alpenstock, for she had already been climbing something; and on her little feet a pair of such very stout boots, that I did not wonder that her uncle had called our

attention to them. It was easy to see that these two relatives, apparently so unsympathising and even antagonistic, were on the best of terms with one another.

'I know she tyrannises over me,' explained the old gentleman, in apology for his abject submission to this fair enslaver; 'but then, it is only for a little while. Unlike *you*, Mr. Fred, when I once put my foot on English soil, I am a free man again; *here*, I admit, I do indulge her a little. She is presently going to drag me up to the Æggischorn to visit—what is it, Minna?—O, the Märjelensee.'

'Why, that is close to the Alitsch glacier, is it not?' said I.

'My *dear* sir,' pleaded Mr. Clote, 'how *should* I know? Ask Minna.'

Minna said it was; protested that there was nothing so well worth seeing as that elevated lake (subsequently compared by Mr. Clote to a more familiar sheet of water, the pond at Hendon); and that the accom-

modation at the Æggischorn was perfect—'like a delightful picnic.'

My wife and I both listened to her with interest, but with very different feelings. It seemed to me, caught as I was just escaping from this melancholy district—at the very outlet of it—and thus reminded of the spectral scene which haunted me, that my eyes were doomed to look upon it as it really existed. If this were so, it was better to get it over at once, and in cheerful company.

When, therefore, Nelly said, 'O, Fred, let us go with them!' without any recollection in her mind of the locality as being associated with poor Jane's catastrophe, I acceded to her request at once. I did not think it necessary to tell her why I did so; and acquiescence in a bridegroom being the most natural proceeding in the world, she suspected nothing.

On the first opportunity, however, which did not happen till evening—for the lawyer

and my wife went up on horseback to the Æggischorn, while I and Minna the Indomitable walked—I told Mr. Clote that if it could be done without frightening the ladies, I should very much like to explore, on the morrow, the very spot where the accident to my cousin had occurred.

'That is all very well,' said the lawyer; 'but it can't be done without frightening *me*. To visit such a place as you describe, I should require not only to be roped to any number of guides, but to the hotel itself; and even so, I should prefer it to be a bigger one.'

'We will, of course, take guides and ropes,' said I; 'but I am quite sure, from poor Cecil's description of the place, that we need run into no danger. That he saw all was done that could be done, I have no doubt; but still, I feel that it would be some sort of satisfaction to me to gaze on the very grave-mouth that received my cousin, and to convince myself with my own

eyes that it is not possible to rescue her poor body from the sharp teeth of frost and snow.'

Mr. Clote shuddered.

'It is a most pious wish of yours, Mr. Fred, no doubt; but I really see no sort of obligation—at all events, on *my* part—'

'I'm not so sure of that,' interrupted I gravely. 'You are poor Jane's trustee; it is your duty to take every reasonable means of convincing yourself of the fact of her demise. The body has never been discovered: how do you know she *is* dead? Suppose the crevasse were to be thoroughly explored, and the body not found at all!'

'Upon my life,' said Mr. Clote, 'that's quite a new view of the matter. I think there's something *in* that. Dear me! To be sure, I have got nobody's word for your poor cousin's death but that of a parcel of foreigners, and of her brother himself, and *he's an interested party*. He's got her four thousand pounds, you know. Of course, I

would take his word on such a point, in preference to the combined evidence of the governors of the Bank of England; but it certainly would be more business-like to investigate the locality for myself. It is deuced slippery on a glacier — isn't it, though?'

I calmed the little lawyer's fears, and vigorously prodded the place where his conscience had proved tender, till he agreed to accompany me to the Alitsch glacier. I did not intend to tell the ladies of our project till next morning, when I hoped to induce them to stay at the hotel while we put it into execution. But I found, on retiring that night, that my wife knew all about the catastrophe — the chambermaid at the inn having been very communicative to her upon the matter — and that both she and Miss Clote had made up their minds to visit the place.

'To tell you the truth, Fred, though I had quite forgotten the names of the Alitsch

glacier and the Märjelensee, I have scarcely ever had poor Jane's accident out of my mind since I have been in Switzerland, though I would not have told you so for the world, had not this happened; and now that we are so near to the spot, I should as soon think of neglecting to visit it as of passing by the churchyard in which she lay buried. If the expedition is dangerous, then of course that is a different matter; and Minna and I should only be in the way.'

It was arranged, then, that if the guides should give leave, the ladies were to accompany us to the scene of last year's disaster; and they did give leave. Scores of men, and a good many ladies, had already visited it, at the conclusion of last year's season; and, in fact, we were compelled to understand that the Alitsch crevasse had become a sort of sensational exhibition. This shocked me excessively, and Nelly as much as myself. If,

'To us,
The fools of habit, sweeter seems
To rest beneath the clover sod
That takes the sunshine and the rains,
Or where the kneeling hamlet drains
The chalice of the grapes of God,'

than to 'lie fathom deep in brine, tossing with tangle and with shell'—how much more did we revolt against our lost one being buried in the thick-ribbed ice, and looked for, though unseen, by curious careless eyes, for year after year to come!

It was very early in the season, for Switzerland; no pilgrimage had as yet been made to the place since the autumn, and Nature, though so changeless in her general aspect, is very variable in such a region with respect to her lesser features; still we were positively assured that the fatal spot would be recognisable; and on the morrow, accompanied by guides, carrying an abundance of ropes and a scaling-ladder, we four set out for it accordingly.

CHAPTER XI.

OUT OF THE CREVASSE.

As we were the only guests at the Æggischorn, we had plenty of assistance in addition to the guides we had brought from Brieg; but although every member of the local force had been familiar with the aspect of this fatal crevasse last year, they were now quite unable to find it—it was either so altered in its features as to be unrecognisable, or it had altogether disappeared. As the glacier was comparatively free from snow, however, we did not discontinue our researches; though it was evident to me, from what I remembered of Cecil's description of the catastrophe, that we were ranging wide of the spot where it had occurred.

'What is *that*, Fred, on the ice yonder?' inquired Nelly suddenly, pointing out some distant object which had attracted her sharp eyes.

Following the direction of her glance, I perceived something small and black lying by the side of a great yawn in the glacier.

'It is a man's cap,' said I, regarding it through an opera-glass which I had with me. 'How can it possibly have got there?'

'Easily enough,' said one from the inn. 'That is on the road to the Faulberg; and somebody must have dropped it last summer. No one, at all events, has passed that way this year; of that I am certain.'

When we reached the spot, which was not approached without some difficulty, the appearance of the cap—once apparently a wide-awake, but now crushed out of all shape—certainly bore out the man's suggestion. Perhaps it had not suffered much more than a cap would do if left out for a winter upon Helvellyn; but it was certainly

a deplorable object. The silken roof, with the name of the maker, had been rotted out by the snow; but on the leathern lining there were some letters written, which, though faint, were not wholly obliterated. Some of the party thought them O. M., and some C. M.; but Mr. Clote presently pulled out a magnifying-glass—ordinarily used for the perusal of old deeds, but of late employed to convince his niece that even moderate elevations were insurmountable—and decided that the letters were C. W.

'Why, those are Cecil's initials!' cried I. 'He may have lost his cap here in looking for his poor sister; and this, after all, may be the very crevasse we are in search of;' and thinking of what that gaping grave might contain, I gazed down into its cold blue depths with reverent awe.

'Nay, sir,' said the same guide who had spoken before, 'that cannot be; for I know we are a long way from the spot pointed out by the young gentleman, which was

under those steep rocks yonder, as I told you. I was one of those who accompanied him in his first search, and he was very positive about the place.'

'And yet,' said another, 'I do remember that, on that night when he woke us all up at the inn with the bad news, that he did say something about having lost his cap.'

This was quite enough (notwithstanding all were agreed that we were far southward of the fatal spot) to make me insist upon the crevasse being examined. A belt was buckled round one of the chief guides, and, a rope being fixed to it, he was lowered down very gradually, and in accordance with his own directions. Presently he gave a signal to be drawn up, which, of course, was obeyed.

'It is no use, sir,' said he, after a pull at my brandy-flask (for he was damp and cold). 'I went down the crevasse after the poor young lady last year, and feel quite

confident that this is not the same. To begin with, the other had no bottom, and was thrice the size.'

'Have you reached the bottom of this one, then?' inquired I.

'Well—no, sir,' said the man frankly. 'I got to where the crevasse narrows a good deal; but it opens out, I see, below again down to forty feet or so.'

The man had evidently a disinclination to pursue researches not only disagreeable in themselves, but which promised no result. As I looked wistfully round our little party, my eye lit upon a young porter, whose eager face—just like that of a small boy in class who knows his lesson, and sees the question coming down to him—seemed to say, 'Try *me*.'

'Will you go to the bottom of the crevasse, and satisfy us that there is nothing there?' said I.

This he at once agreed to do; and we lowered him as we had lowered the other

man, though, of course, paying out more rope. We could see him, but very indistinctly; but the walls of ice gave back his voice to us quite clearly. Presently he uttered a violent ejaculation, and we began to draw him up with haste, thinking that he had met with some accident.

'No, no,' cried he, in his rough patois, of which Miss Clote was our interpreter. 'More rope. There is something lying here.' In another minute, during which we kept an ominous silence, he added: 'It is a dead man.'

Imagine the effect of such a ghastly statement delivered by its unseen utterer from the depths of that icy vault! Exclamations of horror burst from every mouth; but Nelly turned so deadly pale that I put my arm around her, thinking she was about to fall.

'There is no dead man there,' said the guide who had already descended; 'for we have had no one missing. The cold has

touched Baudin's brain. It is not right to—'

'Pull up—stout and steady,' here interrupted Baudin from below.

And we did so. The weight was much heavier than before.

'It is worse than anything you imagine,' whispered Nelly in my ear. 'O Fred, be firm, be calm! I know who it is that he is bringing with him.'

'Nay, nay,' said I comfortingly; 'dreadful as may be the spectacle, it is not poor Jane, we may be sure.'

'I know that,' answered she, with a shudder. 'But this is worse—ten thousand times worse. Be calm, be firm.'

I really thought that my poor darling was for the moment frightened out of her wits. It would have been excusable enough had she been so. I should have sent both the ladies back to the hotel ere this, if we could have spared the men to accompany them; but we could scarcely discontinue

such work as that we had in hand, even for such a purpose. I motioned to Mr. Clote to take my wife, and lead her, with Minna, a few paces off; but a fascination which I could not resist kept my own eyes fixed upon the crevasse. It was fortunate for brave young Baudin that there were plenty of hands at the rope beside my own; for the spectacle that was now presented fairly paralysed me. Along with Baudin, and side by side with him, was now emerging from the crevasse another form, another face—a face which, though it had suffered a sad change, was still as recognisable to me as that of my bride herself; a face, the owner of which had once bid me not to fear, for that I should surely see it again—*the face of my cousin Cecil!*

My brain reeled as I looked down at him; but I could not disbelieve my own eyes. It was undoubtedly he who had thus kept Tryst in such a ghastly fashion. I did not utter a syllable; some instinct re-

pressed the cry that rose to my lips, and dried my tears at their source. If he had raised up an ice-cold finger, in sign of silence, I could not have felt more bound to keep my lips sealed for his sake, though my reason could not tell me why. The idea that was uppermost in the medley of weird thoughts that crowded on my mind was, that he from whom I had parted a few weeks ago—almost in anger, certainly with but little of that ancient friendship which had once seemed so inviolable—had come hither to the spot where he had lost his sister, and sought death by her side. I did not comprehend what the men were saying, in hushed tones, about the length of time that the body must needs have been lying in that icy charnel-house. One said, 'For years;' and one, 'No, no; but through the winter.' Evidently none of the Æggischorn people recognised it for their visitor of the preceding season, as they took it up among them and began to carry it towards the

inn. Nelly and Minna had hidden their faces in a close embrace; but Mr. Clote was staring at me like one thunderstruck. I held my hand up and shook my head; and he understood me, and was silent. Nothing more was said at present that had reference to this dread discovery; for our guides perceived that the nerves of all the party were shaken by it, and applied themselves solely to smooth the difficulties of the way. As for poor Nelly, she had fallen into a sort of half-swoon, and walked like one in her sleep; so her we carried. She recovered, however, before we reached the inn, which we found in great commotion. Fortunately, although the landlord observed something to us about the likeness of the corpse to the poor young lady who had lodged with him last year and perished near the same spot, he did not pursue the subject; and as we were supposed to be connected with the deceased, we were left quite to ourselves. It was a great relief to

us all (even to Minna, though she had no such reasons for courting privacy as the rest of us) to find ourselves alone.

'Did I not tell you, Fred, that I knew whom we should find?' were Nelly's first disjointed, half-hysterical words.

'You did,' said I. 'But how, in Heaven's name, did you guess it was poor Cecil?'

'I knew it,' continued she, 'from the moment we found the cap with his initials in it. I bribed the porter to volunteer to descend the crevasse when the other man declined to do so. I would have gone down myself rather than have left him there. O, think of it, Fred, lying there all alone in the ice and snow of Alpine winter!' and she began to sob most pitifully.

'I don't understand all this,' said Mr. Clote, looking from my wife to me. 'I parted from my unhappy client certainly not two months ago; and you talk of his having lain in that dreadful place throughout the winter.'

'Nelly is right, Mr. Clote,' said I gravely, for I saw it all now. 'This matter, as my wife whispered ere I saw his face, is far worse than we imagine. It is not only Death that we have to face, but Deceit and Fraud.' Here I hesitated. 'Your niece can be relied on, I am sure?'

Minna rose to go, with a deep blush; but her uncle laid his hand upon her shoulders. 'The girl is true as steel,' said he. 'If the honour of your whole family should be placed in her hands, believe me, it would be safe.'

'I am about to place it there,' said I solemnly. 'If this body is that of my Cousin Cecil, Mr. Clote, where, think you, is Jane? You told me only yesterday that Cecil was benefited to the extent of four thousand pounds by his sister's death; how much would Jane have been benefited by that of Cecil?'

'Why, nothing — nothing at all; the estate would have then passed to you.'

'Just so. By personating Cecil, however, Jane has contrived to secure his fortune and her own as well.'

'Personating Cecil? You don't mean to tell me that my client—your cousin—whom I have had interviews with a dozen times, is a *woman?*—a chit of a girl in man's clothes. It is absolutely incredible, sir. No woman had ever such a head for business, to begin with.'

'My Cousin Jane was always shrewd, Mr. Clote,' said I, 'and somewhat too shrewd. I will stake my life that the fraud I have described has been put upon us, though much indeed yet remains to be explained. What a return has that woman made for a brother's love!' Alas, thought I, if that poor cold breast lying yonder could feel a pang from human wrong-doing, how through and through would it be smitten now!

'A base return indeed,' mused the old lawyer; 'and with what guileful craft she

has gone to work! It is certainly most fortunate that you fell in with me. You and your wife are interested parties, you see, but I can bear independent testimony with respect to identification. Not, however, that she'll venture to fight such a question for a moment. You'll not make it a criminal matter, I suppose, unless you think—'

'Of course not,' interrupted I; 'I should not dream of prosecuting Jane, for her poor brother's sake.—What is it you mean?' for there was a look in the lawyer's face significant of something amiss, worse even than what we already knew.

'You might do it *for* his sake. I mean, that it is just possible that there has been foul play in the matter—as to the way, I mean, in which your cousin came by his end.'

My blood seemed to stand still in my veins as I listened to his words. 'If I thought *that*,' cried I with vehemence, 'the law should have its way to the uttermost with her. I myself—'

'Hush, hush! for we do *not* think that,' interrupted Nelly, rising, and laying her hand upon my arm. 'If any one has cause to complain that Cousin Jane has been her enemy, *I* have; and it is I who say that she is innocent of any such charge. When Cecil (as I thought her to be) was striving to prevent my marriage all he could, and (as was pretended) for his sister's sake, I never doubted even then that sister and brother had loved one another dearly, and I do not doubt it now. Jane never loved but two persons on earth'—here Nelly glanced at me with tender significance—'but she loved them with all her heart, and one of them was Cecil.'

'That may be as you say, my dear Mrs. Fred,' said Mr. Clote thoughtfully; 'but I look to the business aspect of the matter, while you regard it from a sentimental point of view. Now, to *my* eyes, that deed of gift to your husband of all Cecil's fortune, except a bare thousand pounds—

which was probably retained for the very reason that if she had given all, it would have looked too *like* restitution—the execution of that deed, I say, seems to me to argue acute remorse.'

'No, no, Mr. Clote,' continued Nelly; 'it was not that, though I cannot undertake to say what it was. It may have a suspicious look to you; to *me* it is simply inexplicable: and remember'—here she turned to me again—'that deed was not drawn up until our marriage-day was fixed. No; Jane never harmed her brother—I will stake my life, nay, more, dear Fred, your love, on that; but when he met his death yonder, so suddenly, a dreadful instinct must have seized her to take advantage of it. If you and I had not been engaged to one another, it is my belief Jane would never have done so; but she could not endure the thought that your inheritance of Cecil's wealth would enable you to marry *me*.'

'It needs a woman to explain a woman's

conduct, uncle dear,' said Minna softly: 'you may be sure that Mrs. Wray is right.'

'But what are we to *do?*' ejaculated Mr. Clote. 'You have no right to indulge in sentiment, you know—that is, to compound a felony—at the expense of the law of the land. You don't mean to say that you are going to let this sort of thing go on? This masquerading cousin of yours is not to be allowed to keep the property that has been entailed upon heirs-male, I suppose; you'll surely stop *that.*'

'Let us sleep a night upon it, Mr. Clote,' replied I, quoting a favourite maxim of the lawyer's own. 'We are all of us far too much excited, and some too pained and distressed, to exercise any sober judgment on it just now.'

For my part, indeed, I was scarcely master of myself; for while we were thus talking about Cecil's property, was not his own dear self, or rather the poor battered shell that had once held him, lying without, un-

der a shed, stared at, perchance, by prying irreverent eyes, or tended by unloving alien hands, at least. I did not venture to visit him, however, lest my emotions should betray me, until nightfall, when the superstitious fears of others made them glad enough to leave him to me alone.

I shall never forget that solemn interview—if a meeting between the dead and the living can so be termed. The moon was shining through the windowless shed, and fell full upon the rough coffin in which he had been already placed. The lid was not yet fastened down, and I took it off to look my last upon him. A change for the worse had come over it, even during the last few hours that the body had been exposed to the air; but I could still recognise the face that had always worn a smile for me, and never an angry look. On his finger was a poor ring I had given him when he had left Gatcombe; and I remembered, for the first time, how moved his sister had been

when I asked her what had become of it. 'You promised me,' I had said, 'that it should never leave your hand;' and she had made some lame excuse for having lost it. But Cecil had kept his promise — warm-hearted honest Cecil, who had been wronged so cruelly in the opinion of his friend, and well-nigh despised. I protest that I was more wroth with Jane upon that account—the injustice which her deception had caused us to do him—than at all else. To have thought him (of all men) avaricious, mean, morose, and he all the while lying lost and dead in his grave of ice—how his dumb face reproved me *now!*

CHAPTER XII.

COMING HOME.

When I had bidden adieu to my poor friend for ever, and retired at last to my own chamber, it was not to sleep, but to think upon his fate, and to pass in review again and again the strange events that had succeeded it. My wife was as wakeful as myself, and full of the same thoughts, which she pursued with far more skill than I. Blame she had no cause to feel, as I had; nor was her sorrow, though great, so violent as to quench, as it were, with tears (as it did in my case) the fire of her indignation against Jane; or perhaps, as Minna had said, woman's wit is keener than man's to observe the actions and guess the motives of those of her own sex. She astounded me by declaring that an actual suspicion

of the truth respecting Jane had flashed upon her on the night when I read the letter which announced (the supposed) Cecil's intention of never seeing us more. It was so like a woman's letter, she said, from first to last. It was true, she had dismissed the idea from her mind, next moment, as too monstrous to be entertained; but it had recurred again, in spite of herself, when Mr. Clote called with his news, and had certainly induced her to tear up the deed of gift — an act which I had myself thought out of keeping with Nelly's nature, which was quiet and undemonstrative, though firm and resolute. A hundred incidents occurred to us now, any one of which would have strengthened suspicion, had we once entertained it; but, of course (with the exception of those momentary instincts on Nelly's part, which I have just mentioned), we had entertained none.

Cecil's—that is, the supposed Cecil's—forgetfulness of all that happened in the old

Gatcombe days, except in so far as his sister had been mixed up with them; and in particular, his total obliviousness of the plays that we had been wont to write, I might almost say together, since much of them had been contributed by his own pen; his excusing himself from playing the flute—which, in reality, he could not play at all, but only the real Cecil—and, on the other hand, the improvement which we had all noticed in his touch on the piano. How easy it was now to explain his disinclination for going into society, since the more eyes were fixed upon him, the greater chance of course he ran of discovery; and especially his determined objection to meet Ruth. He had feared her eyes beyond all others, and would, without doubt, never have attended the performance of the *Footpage* had he dreamed that she and Miss Brabant were the same person. More than all, and which ought to have excited in us something more than mere surprise, was

that astounding circumstance of his not recognising Ruth, even when brought face to face with her. How feeble now appeared those arguments by which I had endeavoured to explain this fact away, both to myself and others; and how sagacious had Lady Repton shown herself in attaching such extreme importance to the occurrence! No wonder that my masquerading cousin had dreaded *her* sharp looks, and striven to propitiate her by all means in her power!

'You don't think, by the bye,' said I, 'that her ladyship herself had any suspicion of the truth, do you, Nelly?'

'No,' returned my wife slowly, 'I do not think she had; and yet, I believe, she was always on the very verge of discovering it. "I can't understand this change in your Cousin Cecil," she would say, half-a-dozen times a day. "He is not himself at all, and he has certainly not altered for the better." But then, again, she was always ready to allow that his friendship for yourself was

as warm and loyal as ever. In fact, Fred, your Cousin Jane would not have been able to carry on the imposition for a day, if she had not been in love with you, which enabled her with ease to simulate friendship, and still keep a residue of tenderness.'

'Poor Jane!' sighed I.

'It will be time enough to pity her when she has owned her crime,' observed my wife dryly.

Here there was a little pause.

'Aunt Ben had no suspicion of the matter, Nelly, think you?'

'None whatever. No one had any, to be called such.'

'One person, however,' said I, 'has known the fact for these two months. Ruth, of course, discovered it on the day of their interview.'

'She discovered it before, Fred. She knew it on the previous night, when we were at the theatre. I well recollect now that I saw Miss Brabant's face peering

through the curtain, when you were acknowledging the plaudits of the audience, with a pained puzzled look upon it that I could not understand; it struck me as so strange—for I had forgotten the relation between them, and, indeed, everything else but your triumph—that she should be looking at your cousin, and not at you; and then do you remember the message that arrived immediately afterwards, asking you to come behind the scenes? If you had gone alone, this mystery would, I think, have been solved at once; but as Jane accompanied you, Ruth took her own way with her in the matter.'

'And she has kept her own way ever since,' mused I. 'She must certainly have some very powerful reason for silence, since I am sure she would not voluntarily be a party to any fraud on you and me, and, above all, to benefit Jane.'

To that opinion my wife assented; but her wits could not help mine to any con-

clusion as to Ruth's motive. One thing, indeed, was tolerably plain, that she had been made, by some means or other, Jane's confidant, and could elucidate matters if she would. And yet I shrank from frankly disclosing the whole affair to Ruth, for fear that she might, after all, be herself deceived; it was very unlikely, but still in a case where so many improbabilities did exist, that one also might. On the other hand, I had no means of communicating with Jane except through her.

The best way of contriving this, of letting my cousin understand that the fraud was discovered, without at the same time disclosing it, should the letter fall into the hands of a third person ignorant of the fraud, occupied our thoughts for hours; but at last I hit upon a plan which at least had simplicity to recommend it, and if approved of by Mr. Clote, we decided to act upon it on the morrow. Convinced that we had now done our best in the way

both of counsel and reflection, we contrived, though not until the little household of the inn was already astir, to snatch a little sleep.

The course I proposed to myself, and in which Mr. Clote concurred, was, that I should write to Jane at once, but not to Ruth. The note would, of course, pass through the latter's hands; and its Swiss postmark and the *Immediate* upon the cover, would, if she were in possession of the secret, convince her that it was discovered. At all events, it was probable that she would open the note, and finding that all was known, would take such means to inform Jane as might seem most judicious.

On the other hand, if Ruth was herself ignorant of the matter, and mere curiosity compelled her to open the note, it was so worded as not to compromise Jane; and in such a case, the communication would, of course, be forwarded (for it was very certain now that Ruth and my cousin were

not under the same roof), and must be left to have its own effect. It ran as follows:

COUSIN—(for I could not bring myself to write 'Dear Cecil' now, with the protest of that poor dead face so fresh in my recollection),—I have tidings for you which must needs demand your attention: our lost one was found here in a crevasse of the Alitsch glacier last night, and is to be buried to-morrow. Mr. Clote is with us at this place, the Æggischorn, which you doubtless remember so vividly, and the identification of the body is established beyond doubt; but it will not be made public, unless you choose it to be so. The newspapers will doubtless speak of it as that of 'an unknown tourist;' and so far as we are concerned, believe me, we should prefer it to be always so described. We shall be at home when this letter reaches you; so direct thither to your kinsman,

FREDERICK WRAY.

The nails were being driven into my dear Cecil's coffin as I wrote this letter; and when I addressed it to 'Cecil Wray,' I felt as sharp a pain as though they had been aimed at my own heart; yet, curiously enough, my very love for him made me tender towards the sister he had held so dear, and when that letter had once passed beyond my power to do so, I would have given much to have recalled it.

For was it not but too likely that it might have some immediately fatal effect upon its unhappy recipient? I remembered now with a shudder that almost fatal day at his hotel—I still thought of it as 'his' from habit—when I had arrived only just in time to prevent him from committing a new and still more deadly crime than that of which he stood convicted; and how much more reason was there for his committing it *now!* I recalled his look of terror, too great, as it seemed to me, even then, to be ascribed to the propinquity of

death, and found the right solution of it. He had not recognised my voice, changed by fear and excitement, when I cried 'Cecil! Cecil!' at the door; and the sound had doubtless struck him as something supernatural—a cry of reproach from yonder icy tomb, or the voice of his own conscience appealing to a dead brother for pardon. The letter on his desk, about which he had been so solicitous as to whether I had read it or not, had doubtless been his confession, made, as he imagined, on the brink of eternity; and was there not far more reason for his crossing that brink *now*—for his escaping 'anywhere, anywhere out of the world' wherein his fraud and falsehood had been exposed—than there had been *then!* To be sure he had passed his oath to me that he would never again attempt his life, but he had done so with that curious proviso, 'unless I myself should approve his doing so'—suggested, doubtless, in view of possible detection; and might he not now

easily convince himself that in my opinion, as in his own, the best thing that he could do in so sad a case was to end shame and life together!

This apprehension troubled me exceedingly, though I strove to keep it to myself, and haunted me more and more with every hour that brought us nearer home. My wife, and even Mr. Clote and Minna (who accompanied us), were anxious enough for the contents of that letter which we should doubtless find awaiting us in Merton-square; but, for my part, I scarcely looked for a letter at all, but only for ghastly tidings.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHO BRIBED BATTY?

We found Aunt Ben awaiting our return in a most excited state; for we had not liked to intrust to paper what had brought us home so suddenly, but had only written to say we were coming. We, on our part too, had an anxious question to put to her: Was there a letter from Cecil? But she replied carelessly that there was not, and rallied me about my devotion to my cousin, 'which seemed to make Fred ignore his poor old aunt and everybody else.'

I am sure the dear kind soul had no cause to say that; for the sight of her honest kindly face was welcome to us both —more at that time than ever, for its promise of sympathy in trouble. She listened

to the story of our discovery at the Æggischorn with hushed amazement; not that surprise was too great for horror, but that, from the moment she understood what had happened, the mere details ceased to interest her, in comparison with her concern for the unhappy Jane.

'What *will* she do? What *can* she do?' ejaculated she. 'Some one should go to her at once.'

In this I quite concurred; and Aunt Ben volunteered to be the ambassador.

'I will go to Miss Brabant the first thing to-morrow morning,' said I, 'and procure the address.'

'By the bye, there *is* a letter for you from Miss Brabant on the drawing-room mantelpiece.'

I had flown downstairs and seized the letter before Aunt Ben had done explaining to Nelly that she had thought 'it didn't signify, and might wait.' It was but a little note indeed, written on pink paper, and

just such a communication, to look at, as might have 'waited' (from my aunt's point of view) any amount of time without damage; but its contents were very pregnant.

DEAR MASTER FRED,—I opened the letter you addressed to Cecil, for which, under the circumstances, I had his authority. After much consideration, I have sent it on this afternoon. Heaven grant I have not done wrong! My mind misgives me. I must see you immediately upon your arrival. Do not lose a moment. If I am at the theatre, come and fetch me.—Yours truly, RUTH.

It was then ten o'clock at night. I snatched up a newspaper, and, looking at the performance-list of the Corintheum, perceived Miss Brabant advertised for the burlesque as well as for the *Foot-page*. She would be at the theatre then for another hour; and thither I determined to go, that

I might see her the first moment she was at liberty.

For once, even Aunt Ben did not disapprove of my eagerness for an interview with Ruth.

'I have done her wrong, I allow, Fred,' said she; 'at all events, with respect to your cousin.'

Agitated as I was, I could scarcely help laughing at the unnecessary air of candour with which this apology was made.

'It is most creditable to you, Aunt Ben,' said I, 'to confess as much.'

'I am always ready to own myself in the wrong when I *am* in the wrong,' returned she gravely. 'But you must admit that the case was most suspicious. We ought to be charitable; but it surely can scarcely be expected of us to credit a gentleman with being a lady.'

The burlesque was drawing to its close as I entered the theatre; but I had hardly patience to await its conclusion. How thin

and pointless fell its poor jests upon my ear, as I stood, concealed from the notice of those upon the stage, and watched its tinselled scenes and worthless glitter! The central figure was always the Fairy Queen (Miss Brabant), more beautiful than all the rest, and more unreal. Beneath the paint which she had freely given her cheeks, I thought I could discern the traces of anxiety and grief; and at times her grand eyes seemed to wander round the house, as though in search of some new-comer. But she played her part to perfection; and when at last the curtain fell, it was amid a tumult of applause. A born actress was Ruth, if ever there was one; for it was certainly not want of feeling that enabled her to throw aside the burden of such a secret as she carried in her breast, and assume so naturally a character that was to real life what a rainbow is to a sunbeam.

I came upon her ere she had reached her dressing-room, and while she was still

bedizened in her robes of mimic state. They were rich and costly, however, as though they had belonged to veritable majesty; and I noticed that her fingers were covered with splendid rings.

'You are come at last!' were her first eager words. 'I have been looking for you all the evening.'—Then, turning to her 'dresser:' 'Bring me my cloak and hood, girl.'

'But I can wait,' said I.

'Yes; but I can *not*,' interrupted she imperiously. 'Every moment, for all that we can tell, is priceless.'

'Do you apprehend, then, that he—that she—' My voice was tremulous, I know; for I dreaded to hear her corroborate my fears by her own.

'I apprehend the worst,' answered she gravely.

The cloak and hood were brought, and rapidly adjusted, yet with such skill that they quenched the glories of her stage

attire as completely as an extinguisher on flame.

A brougham was in waiting at the stage-door, which carried us quickly to Laburnum Villa.

'Don't talk to me upon the way,' said she; 'let me collect my thoughts; for I have much to tell you.'

Fantine opened the door to us without betraying a scintillation of astonishment. She had the faculty of not being surprised at any event; or, if she did possess the curiosity peculiar to her sex, she had the resolution of a North-American Indian not to betray it. She lighted the chandelier in the little drawing-room, relieved her mistress of her cloak, and left us together, at midnight—Ruth a dazzling butterfly, and I a grub, travel-worn and travel-stained (for I had had no time even to change my clothes)—as unconcernedly as though I were making a morning call.

'I knew this interview must come to

pass some day, Master Fred,' began Ruth slowly, and speaking with painful effort; 'I have been expecting it, looking forward to it with dread, for months, that appear years. It is hard for you; but it is far worse for me, as you will hear.' Here she stopped, and laid her hand upon her heart, as though she could scarce draw breath.

To spare her, and help her out with a narration that gave such evident pain, I put a question.

'You knew her, did you not, from the moment that you first set eyes on her in Cecil's clothes?'

'I knew her while she stood by you in the box, Master Fred. I am too much used to dress in masculine attire myself to fail to detect such masquerading in others. But the recognition brought about another knowledge—the corroboration of a suspicion much more terrible, much more strange, that had haunted me for years.'

'What suspicion?' inquired I. 'What

knowledge *could* be more terrible or strange than that about which I am here to speak?'

'Ah, *you* have forgotten,' said Ruth vehemently. 'But I, who loved him, with all his faults, from his cradle even to that awful day when he and I were buried in one living grave; I, for whom he toiled, and to whom, for so many years, he was father and mother, and lover, and all; *I* had not forgotten my brother Richard.'

'But how did the sight of Jane, disguised in man's attire, remind you of your poor brother?'

'Because I saw in her *his murderer!* Yes; it struck none of you wise gentlemen in Sandylandshire that Batty's story might, after all, be true; but it struck *me* from the very first. It *was* Cecil's gold that bribed the poor wretch to remove the poles, and it was Cecil's self that placed it in his hands—that is, this spurious Cecil; not my own. No, no; not he who risked his life to save my brother, and who did

save *me*—O, would that he had let me die!—but this one.'

Ruth was sobbing as an angry child sobs, partly with fury, partly with grief, and her eyes flashed fire through her tears.

'She did not wish to murder Richard, I know; she wanted to kill *me*, the village wench whose beauty had witched her brother. But since she could not find the chance to do it unless by slaying another victim also, my Richard was sacrificed. What mattered the life of a mere country clown like him, when weighed against my lady's prospects!—*Not capable of it?*' (This in reply to some feeble protest of my own, though, to say truth, I had no doubt that Ruth was right, and that the true explanation of Batty's story had been found at last.) 'You saw her face when she stood at our cottage-door—the first time that I ever met her brother—and yet you say not capable of it! Why, there was Murder in her eyes that very day!'

When I recalled that scene to mind, I could not deny it. I remembered Jane's outburst of contempt and fury; her patient submission under Cecil's passionate rebuke; and then her brooding silence on the journey home. It was not likely, being what she was, that she should ever forget that it was through Ruth that her brother's wrath (for the first time in their lives, as I believe) had been evoked against her; and then, as weeks went on, and Cecil's love for Ruth came to his sister's ears (as no doubt it did), was it likely, being what she was, that she should have borne it tamely, unless she had had some scheme within herself, like this, which was to have ended all at a single blow! I called to mind that hour upon the sand-cliff when I saw her coming from the pine-wood above Wayford, pale with rage; the fiendish plot that had been so long smouldering in her mind, doubtless just ripe for action; and, again, how she had kept her room from indisposi-

tion—the better, probably, to slip out unobserved in Cecil's clothes, and bribe the foolish lad; and then, again, how, as I had noticed when the news of the catastrophe came to us in the Hall, she alone of all the audience seemed neither surprised nor shocked, but only looked to see the effect of it on Cecil. She alone, too, had abstained on that occasion from coming to the sand-cliff: resolute and cruel as her nature had showed itself to be, she had not been equal to the task of watching by the pit-mouth while the bodies of her victims were being dragged out into the sunlight, that one, at least, was never to behold again. Her self-control had broken down, too, upon the night when the constable brought word that the real murderer had been discovered in her unconscious instrument, Batty, though that, of course, had scarcely excited our surprise, much less suspicion. Read by the light of this startling discovery, in short, all the seeming inconsis-

tencies in Jane's conduct were accounted for, and her motives explained.

'But how was it, Ruth, knowing what you did,' inquired I, 'that you yourself kept silence?'

'I *knew* nothing, Master Fred,' returned she vehemently. 'Is it not enough that my poor brother's dying words should ring in my ears, demanding justice even now, without your taunts to back them! I did *not* know; I scarcely even guessed. A black suspicion haunted me, as I have said, but that was all. I strove to think it baseless for Mr. Cecil's sake. You think I did not love him; and you used to think so. Ah me, I would I had loved him less, and justice more!'

'And yet, Ruth, when I went to wish you good-bye for him, as it seemed probable for ever—'

'It *was* for ever,' interrupted she. 'I knew *that*, whatever might happen. This Jane, I felt, would never suffer us to meet

again; and hatred of her, and above all, this dread suspicion of her, overshadowed all my being, and chilled my love. But do not say I did not love him, when even now, when I know all for certain, my love is still so strong that, for his sake, I permit my brother's blood to cry out to me, in vain, and her to live on unpunished! I told her so, in this room, to her face; and it was the bitterest drop in all the cup of her humiliation to know that she owed her life to the love I bore her brother!'

A look of triumph lit up Ruth's haggard features for an instant; but it passed away, and gave place to the same dejection as before.

'It matters not now, Master Fred—when nothing matters—but you have been very good to me, and such friends are very, very scarce with such as I, and I should like to keep your good opinion of me when I can. You are doubtless thinking that I ought not to have taken Cecil's money.

But why not, since Jane had killed my bread-winner? True, I did not know it then for certain, but I guessed it. And if my guess was right, it would be some beginning of punishment to her to know that her brother had made provision for me, and was still bent on making me his wife. But I myself had lost that hope. While his sister lived, I could never have wedded him; nor, as I then thought, even had she died! I strove to shut him from my thoughts; I changed my name, and made my way in life unknown to all, till accident threw you and me together. Bereft of friends, and utterly forlorn—though always in a whirl of gaiety—the thought of seeing your kind honest face was very welcome to me; and when the opportunity offered itself of doing you some service in my profession, I could not but seize it. You will do me justice as to Cecil even then; I forbade you to let him know that you had discovered me; I declined to receive the

letters that he had confided for me to your hands; I closed the door of my heart against him all I could. But when the news came of Jane's death, my love returned for him as with a torrent's rush, and forced the door. I strove to forget his sister, and to remember only him, and, alas for *me*, I succeeded! You avoided me, for some reason—probably because you perceived the hope that was springing up within me, and knew, from some conversation with your cousin, that it must needs be barren—but I determined, nevertheless, to see him; and I *should* have seen him, though not so soon, had you not brought him with you to the play. What a moment was that when my eyes first lit upon your Cecil, and showed me Jane! I have told you what that single glance revealed to me; but I have not told you all. Not only did I recognise in your disguised cousin the murderer of my brother, but, as I hope for Heaven's mercy, I thought for the

moment that she had murdered Cecil also! If, when you obeyed my summons, you had not brought her with you behind the scenes, I would have had her brought to me at all hazards: not for your sake even, dear Master Fred, nor for your wife's sake, would I have spared that woman, had she proved to be the thrice-dyed villain for whom I took her! For Cecil's sake, I was ready to let her go unpunished for the act, which, designed for my own destruction, slew my brother; and for Cecil's sake (had she turned out to be his murderer), I would have had her hanged, as sure as dawn will break to-day! Imagine what I felt, as I stood side by side with her—I in my page's dress, unrecognised by her, but she disguised from me in vain—and asked her to this house upon the morrow! Once standing face to face with one another, I knew that I should learn the truth; and the next day we stood so. You did not come and hear her tell it—the whole story of her

fraud from first to last—but, take my word for it, she told it truly. Next to herself and *you*—yes, *you*, I say—she loved her brother, and never thought of harming him, nor profiting by any harm to him, until she saw him perish before her eyes. The account she wrote you of the catastrophe was a correct one, if you read "Cecil" for "Jane;" except that the crevasse down which her brother fell was not so deep as she described it to be. He was dead, of course, poor soul, and past all aid; but it was necessary for her purpose that the body should never be brought to light; so she pointed out *another* crevasse, which seemed to be without bottom, as the scene of the calamity. I cannot say when she resolved to play this hateful part; I don't think she quite knows herself. Perhaps the idea first crossed her while she was still upon the glacier, and grew and grew with every minute of fruitless search, until she reached the inn, when the opportunity of

changing her clothes for Cecil's, before her arrival was perceived, presented itself, and overcame her last lingering scruples: then it took final shape. I asked her motives: they were love for you, and hate of Eleanor. She could not bear to think that Cecil's money should enable you to wed your bride; and just as a good mother says of her tempted daughter: "I would rather see her dead before my eyes, than that she should marry such a one;" so Jane said to herself: "I will see the man I love defrauded of his rights, and I myself be his defrauder, rather than that he shall wed my rival."'

'That is like enough, Ruth,' said I thoughtfully. 'But how came you to know it? What spell had you to work with, that could make my Cousin Jane so frank?'

'The shadow that the gallows cast before it,' returned Ruth fiercely. 'My first words to her let her know her life was

in my hands. You should have seen her dark false face—so like to Cecil's, and yet so little like—when I cried: "Murderess! you killed *my* brother; have you also killed your own?" I knew that she was guiltless before she spoke; no one could have refused credit to that look of passionate denial. Great Heaven! what fire abides in that heart of flint! As though she had been some guileless innocent accused of shame she scarcely knew by name, she scorched me with her scorn. "*She* kill her Cecil—she! *Her* precious Cecil!"—as though my love was dross, while hers was gold.'

'But she expressed remorse and sorrow surely, penitence for her crime—I mean for that crime at Gatcombe?'

'I know not if she did or not. I did not speak of *that*—I could not trust myself to do so, but strove to put it from me altogether, since she was to go unpunished. I did but show her she was in my power,

and then spoke of Cecil only, and her fraud.'

'Then it was through *you*,' said I, 'that Jane bade us good-bye, and wanted to have made such amends to us as lay within her power?'

'Not wholly so,' said Ruth. 'Weeks ago, she told me, she had been on the point of putting an end to herself (as you would witness), and making restitution to you that way. She took no pleasure, so she said (and I believe her), in her ill-got wealth (though she strove at first to do so), and would have gladly parted with it to its proper owner, if she could have done so without suspicion. Even *that* she would have risked, she said (and I believe her), but for Cecil's sake. To have her crime discovered, would have been to blacken Cecil's name and memory.'

'And it was that reflection which weighed with you, Ruth, also, and earned her pardon?'

'Pardon? No; she never earned it: it is not mine to give. I have not, or I had not, even pity for her. But it was for Cecil's sake I spared her, and for yours. I could not bring such public shame on you and Eleanor.'

'Thanks, thanks!' said I, with fervour. 'It would indeed have been hard to bear. —Where *is* this wretched woman?'

'At an hotel at Swanby, on the Sussex coast. That is, she *was*.'

'We shall then be able to communicate with her at once?'

'She will be at that address, if she be alive.'

'Do you think the tidings of our late discovery will kill her, then?'

Ruth shook her head. 'No,' said she gravely. 'She will kill herself. I said just now, I had no pity for her, but I did feel pity while I spoke, and I feel it now—the pity that one feels, in any case, for those whom Death has carried before the Eternal

Judge.—There is no hurry now'—for I had risen to my feet in horror at this confirmation of my fears. 'It happened hours ago, if it did happen.'

'Aunt Ben has offered to go down,' said I. 'But if anything so terrible is likely to have occurred, I should not like to let her do so alone.'

'Go with her, Master Fred, is my advice.'

'I will, and let us still hope for the best.'

'Yes,' sighed Ruth, as she shook hands, for I was in haste to be gone now, 'for whatever *is* the best.'

Her last words sank deep within me, for they reminded me again of Jane's proviso, that she would never again attempt her life unless I myself should make excuse for it, and if I did not make excuse for it, I should *now*, for certain, see no cause for wonder.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT LAST.

By the first train next morning, my aunt and I, and Eleanor—for my wife insisted on accompanying us, in hopes to be of some comfort to my wretched, forlorn cousin—went down to Swanby. It was a seaside place of growing repute, with a gigantic hotel, started by one Limited Company (all ruined), and purchased by another, to whom it paid ten per cent and a bonus—a palace in appearance, and for three months in the year, at least, as full of tenants as a barrack. 'There was no sitting-room at present disengaged,' said the lady-manager, in answer to our inquiry; 'but there would be one vacant for certain the next day.

In the mean time we could use the ladies' coffee-room.'

There was an air of embarrassment in the woman's reply, I noticed, but I set it down to some doubt in her own mind of whether the promised apartment would really be disengaged.

In the coffee-room, which was of immense size, it also struck me, as such trifles do strike one, no matter how the mind be occupied with serious matters, that the waiters hung about in groups, and whispered together to an extent which greatly interfered with the practice of their profession.

We ordered some refreshment, and whilst it was getting ready, I inquired of one of them, as carelessly as I could, whether a gentleman of the name of Wray was still stopping at the hotel.

'Mr. Wray, sir? Do you mean Mr. Cecil Wray? Are you any relative of *his*, sir?' asked the waiter mysteriously.

'Yes,' said I. 'Why do you ask? What is the matter? He is not ill, I hope?'

'No, sir, no,' answered the man nervously. 'I'll tell the head waiter, sir.'

And before I could stop him, and inquire the meaning of his strange conduct, he had left the room to summon his chief. The head waiter was a portly man, with even a graver air than is customary with such important fuctionaries, and he moved like a monarch at his own coronation. Before he could get across the room to us, his progress was arrested by a fussy little gentleman at a neighbouring table.

'Waiter, *head* waiter,' cried he, 'what is all this I hear? No one will give me a direct answer, and I insist upon one.'

The head waiter stopped, and stooped to whisper something, of which I could only catch the words, 'quite unnecessary,' and 'not infectious;' and the fussy little man nodded his head a great many times, and

looked appeased. Then the other resumed his stately progress.

'Were you asking for Mr. Cecil Wray, sir?'

'I was asking whether he was at the hotel,' said I.

'Why, yes, sir, yes, he is,' answered the man in a confidential tone. 'Would you please to walk this way?' And he motioned towards the door.

'Well,' said I, turning doubtfully towards the ladies, 'perhaps it will be as well if I went first.'

'You had better leave the ladies here,' whispered the man behind his hand. So I accompanied him alone.

'If Mr. Wray is any friend of yours, sir, I'm afraid I have bad news for you,' said he, as we left the room.

'He has not met with any accident, I trust?' said I, not knowing what to say, but on my guard not to appear to anticipate any catastrophe.

'No, sir, no. This is his sitting-room, No. 18;' and he stopped at the door so numbered, and produced a key.

'Is he here?' inquired I, unconsciously using the same sick-room whisper in which my companion spoke, and full of dire forebodings.

'No, sir. You can come in. They took him upstairs at once.'

The room was empty, but showed signs of recent occupation; on the floor were strewed some fragments of letters torn into very small pieces, and on the table was the old desk I knew so well, but closed and locked.

'What has happened, man?' said I, in a fever of impatience. 'Tell me the worst.'

'Well, sir, your friend was taken ill this morning on a sudden—just after his letters had been carried in to him at breakfast—yes, sir, that's the truth. He's *dead;* and we've locked the room up, just as it is, in case there should need to be a crowner's 'quest.—Take a glass of water, sir.'

From a carafe upon the sideboard he poured out some water in a tumbler that stood by it.

'One moment,' said I, as I held it in my hand untasted. 'I am Mr. Wray's cousin, and sole relative, and this news has been too much for me. Is the doctor who attended him in the house at present?'

'Yes, sir. I'll fetch him at once. Keep up your spirits, sir, *pray* do!'

I am sure the good man was apprehensive of a second catastrophe in No. 18, with such unwonted quickness did he start upon his errand.

No sooner was I left alone than I emptied the tumbler behind the grate, wiped it thoroughly with my handkerchief, and refilled it from the carafe. In the water I had thrown away I had at once detected the smell of prussic acid. I had hardly satisfied myself, by a hasty glance around the room, that there was no other object of suspicion, before the waiter reappeared,

with a tall gentleman in black, whom he introduced as Dr. Fullam.

'A sad case this of your poor relative's,' were his first words, when we were left alone together.

'A most distressing one, doctor,' said I; 'indeed, the news I have just heard has shocked me beyond measure.'

'Very naturally, very reasonably. I have just been telling the proprietor of the hotel (who, of course, is anxious that there should be no unnecessary to-do about this unfortunate matter) that I have no doubt in my own mind that it was the heart. Have you any cause for suspecting that your relative was suffering from any nervous depression? Could any news have arrived, think you,' and he looked down at the scraps of paper, 'likely to give him a sudden shock?'

'Yes,' said I; 'I think it extremely probable.'

'Very good. That corroborates my view,

you see. It is most important, for the proprietor's sake as well as your own, that no unnecessary stir, such as an inquest would infallibly make, should happen. I have no doubt about its being the heart.'

I nodded, unwilling to trust myself to speak.

'Do you wish to see the body?'

'No,' said I; 'unless it is absolutely necessary for the sake of identification.'

'You can satisfy me of that, sir, by word of mouth,' said the doctor, sinking his voice to a whisper. 'I said it was a sad case; let me now add that it is a very strange one. The name of Cecil is one common to both sexes. Do you understand me?'

'Perfectly,' said I, with significance. 'I am very far from wishing you to do anything contrary to the law, or your own conscience; but if you can manage matters so as to prevent idle talk, you would be conferring a great personal obligation.'

'I will do my best, sir,' said the doctor thoughtfully; 'at all events, there need be no farther inquiry as to the cause of death. The proprietors are naturally desirous to avoid publicity.'

Whether Dr. Fullam was himself a shareholder in the hotel company, or only physician in ordinary to the establishment, I never knew; but his services were of the utmost value to us. I revealed to him the whole circumstances of the case, with the exception of what I had detected in the tumbler. They were corroborated, for his satisfaction, by the respectable Mr. Clote of Lincoln's Inn; and my poor cousin's burial was effected without public scandal.

To stop idle talk, however, was a much more difficult matter. The secret of the sex of the deceased had of necessity to be confided to other and less discreet persons than Dr. Fullam, and eventually it oozed out, and even became a topic for the newspapers.

Those portions of the story, however, which it was most important at that time to keep concealed, remained untold. They are told now, when their revelation can effect no harm, in such a manner as only to inform those very few whom they concern, not others. To the world at large, this 'o'er true narrative' will have no personal application, and seem but a curious episode in human life, to be read and then forgotten.

To those three persons, however, whose names have been most frequently mentioned in this history, the mutual relation between Jane and her brother affords a topic of lasting interest.

Aunt Ben is disposed to think that the love that was certainly shared between them was very unequally distributed; that Jane's love for Cecil was never so great as his for her, and infinitely less than her love for herself. If she had really loved him (argues my aunt), and notwithstanding the

devotion manifested by the great personal risk she ran in the commission of that awful crime at Gatcombe for his sake, it is quite impossible she could have behaved in such a shameful and irreverent manner towards him for his mere money after death.

My wife, on her part, acquits her of all sordid motives, and is of opinion, that though Jane loved her brother dearly, she loved somebody else even better; and that to that misplaced affection her fraudulent impersonation of Cecil was wholly due.

As for me, I strive to see in the character of my unhappy kinswoman an extreme example of that large class of persons who possess affections running fiercely (in her case, uncontrollably), but only in a few channels; never overflowing their narrow banks to fertilise a neighbour field, or even so much as to lay the dust upon the Common Road. Such persons may be good husbands, fathers, brothers, but must needs be bad citizens (in a social sense), and

hardly deserve the name of fellow-men. They are so wholly devoid of human sympathy, that they have none even for those they love. They love in their own way, it is true, but imperiously, despotically, and without commiseration. What pity, then, can such persons be expected to show towards those who dare to interfere between them and the objects of their love? Very great personages, such as emperors and the like, have been known to sweep from the face of the earth those, otherwise innocent, who have ventured to cross them (for which they are rather applauded than otherwise by that great section of humanity who are always ready to kiss 'the strong hand,' even when it is dripping with blood), and such imperial instincts are sometimes found in those who, unhappily for themselves, do not chance to have been born in the purple. The difference between a monarch of inflexible will and 'a determined ruffian' lies only in the fact, that the one has been

brought up at a court, the other at a police court; and yet how very seldom is it that kings are taught that they have 'cricks in their necks'!

I look on Cousin Jane as on a half-mad Czar Peter—shrewd, unprincipled, egotistic, passionate, revengeful. In the eye of justice, she was, of course, but a common criminal, or, if you will, a criminal above the common, since her temptation was comparatively small. I have no sort of mitigation or apology to offer for her. 'It is no excuse,' as I allow to Nelly when we argue upon this matter, 'to say that every individual who sacrifices the interests of another to his own, or makes them of no account in his own mind, because he chances to be wiser or richer, commits the same crime (except in degree) as Jane did when she bribed Batty to remove the props of safety from Richard Waller's pit. It is no excuse to say that every man who makes a spiteful or unjust will commits the same

crime (except in degree) as Jane did when she fraudulently personated her dead brother. It is no excuse—'

'There is no excuse *at all*, dear Fred,' says Nelly, interrupting me with tenderness; 'but there is excuse for *you* for trying to find some palliation for her conduct. I sometimes think, if it had not been for *me* —if you could have returned poor Jane's affection for you from the first—that her heart might have opened like a flower to the sun, and her life been altogether different.'

Aunt Ben shakes her gray head at this.

'Jane would have been Jane,' says she, 'under all circumstances. Let us remember, rather, for our consolation, how she became Jane. Neglect must have attended her from her birth—neglect of morals, of religion, and the absence of all home ties. Without mother, when a mother's care was so indispensable; and with a father who understood so little of a father's duties, is

it surprising that the poor child grew up to be the woman she did? On the other hand, to be sure, dear Cecil, who had no better opportunities, was wholly different.'

So here Aunt Ben's apology breaks down like the rest, and it is a relief to turn to the subject that has been suggested by it—the consideration of Cecil's case alone. Did he ever doubt his sister's love for him? Did he ever apprehend that she was capable of committing a crime for his sake, and out of the greatness of that love? We all agree in thinking he did not, and are glad to think so. As to his entertaining any suspicion of whose hand had bribed poor Batty, the first breath of it would, I verily believe, have slain him.

'As surely,' assents Aunt Ben gravely, 'as the knowledge that her fraud was discovered slew his unhappy sister. It was "the heart," of course, as the doctor said, but it was the shock that affected the heart.'

To this opinion I profess adhesion; for

why should I tell her, or my wife, what I did not tell the doctor, respecting my poor cousin's decease? I had never in my own mind the slightest doubt of how it happened, from the moment when I put that tumbler with its faint sickly perfume to my lips; but it was not till long afterwards, that opening that same old desk of Uncle Tom's, I found corroboration of the fact. In the place the sand-castor had been wont to occupy, was a screwed-down ink-bottle that never had held ink, but a more deadly liquid, the odour of which, though empty, it had not lost, and which I did not fail to recognise. How long had that fatal draught been secreted there for the occasion that was sure to come at last? With what feelings of remorse and agony must its owner have poured it out, and then replaced the screw, and locked the desk, to spare us, if it were possible, one shame the more! What unutterable dread must have possessed that guilty breast! But let us no longer con-

template such a spectacle of despair. She has been removed from the tribunal of human opinion, and has been elsewhere condemned or pardoned. Those words of the world's great poet,

'Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all,'

which were most frequent in my dear father's mouth, seem to fall upon my ear once more in the tones I loved so well:

'Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all;
Close up her eyes and draw the curtain close.'

If Jane had ever written a Confession intended for other eyes than her own (as I believe she had), she had destroyed it. Not a scrap of writing was discovered among her possessions, except some letters of my own to Cecil, and those that I had written to herself, in the belief that I was addressing her brother. Since Ruth had discovered her secret, she did not perhaps deem it necessary to reveal it in her own hand.

Naturally, we all felt indebted to Ruth,

who had certainly done her best—in very difficult circumstances, and at the sacrifice of her own feelings—both for us and for Jane. Even Aunt Ben owned this, and offered no opposition when I expressed my hope that for the future Miss Brabant would be received with welcome at our house. When, therefore, I wrote to tell her of Jane's decease, I enclosed to her a letter from Eleanor, regretting the estrangement that had taken place between them since the old Gatcombe days, and begging as a favour (for she did not pretend to disguise that Ruth had cause for resentment) that their intimacy should be renewed. The reply to the appeal was not direct, but contained in a communication to myself, chiefly about poor Jane. 'I thank your dear wife,' it ran, 'for holding out her pure hand to me so cordially. Do not let her imagine that it is her own fault that the offer of such friendship comes *too late*.'

To me these words had a very sad sig-

nificance, and I almost feared to set them before Aunt Ben, lest she should express some triumph in the accuracy of her prudent foresight. 'Did not I always tell you,' &c. 'Perhaps you will believe me another time.' But in this I did that excellent soul a grievous wrong. She made no comment at the time, but the very next afternoon took Eleanor with her upon an errand which, although bootless, did her infinite credit.

A few months ago, when Ruth was still nourishing an honest love, it might have borne good fruit: to have had such women as Aunt Ben and Nelly about her *then*, would doubtless have been a priceless benefit; but now it was, as poor Ruth had said, 'too late;' she had closed our door against her, as it were, with her own hands.

I know, though she has never owned it, that Aunt Ben blames her own past conduct in this matter severely, and her prejudices generally have in consequence re-

ceived a shock, which renders them less solid and 'four square' to the assaults of reason. To our loving hearts, there seems to us no room in her for other improvement. She continues to reside with us as of old, and though she unnaturally forsakes her own flesh and blood in the person of her nephew, and habitually takes Nelly's part against me in all domestic arguments, I am bound to say she is generally in the right. Another generation is springing up around us, whose affection for her bids fair to rival ours, and with whom she is 'The Great Aunt Benita' (from the Zoological Gardens), 'Big Ben,' and other absurd synonyms, which show love unmixed with fear.

Not long after the event I have just described, Lady Repton became a widow: her lord's last words—which affected her to tears in the repetition of them—were: 'I flatter myself I have some little reputation as a philosopher.'

She lamented him with genuine sorrow;

but after the due time of mourning, she discarded her widow's weeds as unbecoming, and took up her residence in London. She is very gay, and almost as much admired in the great City, though in a different way, as in her youth; but she does not fail to pay frequent visits to her old friends in Merton-square. She protests that she shall never forgive herself in having been taken in so audaciously by the false Cecil, when 'that chit of a girl, the Brabant,' detected the thing at the first glance. 'What a shocking affair it was, my dear, from first to last!' says she; 'and yet there was some humour about it. It always reminds me of that old tale of the woman who shut herself up in the cupboard to hear the freemasons' secret. Just conceive how poor Jane could have enlightened us, had she chosen to do so, concerning your horrid sex! And only think of the "gentlemen's stories" she must have listened to! There; don't be vexed.'

I was not vexed, for it was impossible to be so with good-natured Lady Repton; but the subject was scarcely one for mirth. We often speak of it at home, we three, as I have said, but always with bated breath: shame and sorrow encompass it.

After marriage, friendships are rarely made, or at least they are not the same as those begotten in our youth; and Cousin Cecil was my first friend and my last. My mind recurs to the old times at Gatcombe, and paints him for me, as he was, fresh, frank, and loyal; and then, for a companion picture, mirrors the dark days in which deceit and crime made him their unconscious victim. I see his face once more, bright, blithe, and fond, as when young love first touched it; and then, uncalled for, rise those awful lineaments that lay so long beneath the snow and ice—the face with which he kept his Tryst with me.

The mere form in which death may chance to come to us is but of small

account in the long reckoning of existence; but when I think upon his life, how marred it was through no fault of his own, 'the riddle of the painful earth' grows darker to me, and more than ever do I need the poet's faith that 'somehow, Good will be the final goal of Ill.'

THE END.

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